NISIOISIN

DECAPITATION KUBIKIRI CYCLE

The Blue Savant and the Nonsense User

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Illustrations take

Decapitation

Kubikiri Cycle

The Blue Savant and the Nonsense User

Translated by Greg Moore, previously licensed and published as *Zaregoto, Book 1: The Kubikiri Cycle* by Del Rey, and retitled and revised by Vertical.

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First published in Japan in 2002 by Kodansha Ltd., Tokyo as *Kubikiri Saikuru: Aoiro Savan to Zaregoto Zukai* and reissued as a mass market paperback in 2008.

Publication rights for this English edition arranged through Kodansha Ltd., Tokyo.

Published by Vertical, an imprint of Kodansha USA Publishing, LLC., 2017

ISBN 978-1-945054-21-1

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Edition

Kodansha USA Publishing LLC.
451 Park Avenue South, 7th Floor
New York, NY 10016

www.readvertical.com

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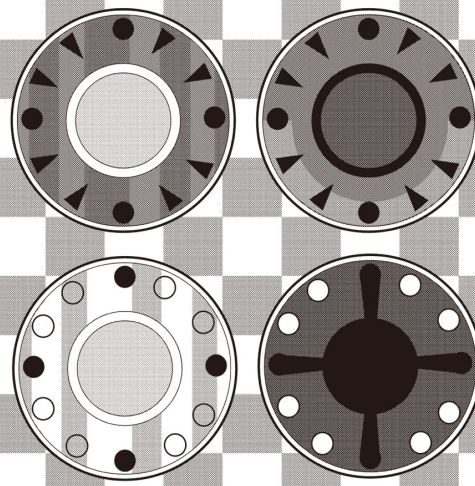
PUBIKIRJASALKKU



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CAST OF CHARACTERS

IRIA AKAGAMI——Mistress of Wet Crow's Feather Island

REI HANDA——Head Maid at the Mansion

AKARI CHIGA——Oldest of the Three Maid Sisters

HIKARI CHIGA——Second of the Three Maid Sisters

TERUKO CHIGA——Youngest of the Three Maid Sisters

KANAMI IBUKI——Genius Painter

YAYOI SASHIRONO——Genius Chef

AKANE SONOYAMA——Genius of the Seven Fools

MAKI HIMENA——Genius Fortune-teller

TOMO KUNAGISA——Genius Techie

SHINYA SAKAKI——Kanami Ibuki's Caretaker

ME (narrator)——Tomo Kunagisa's Attendant

JUN AIKAWA——Humanity's Strongest Contractor

Having one too many talents is even more dangerous than having one too few.

—Nietzsche

“Isn’t there something really scary about people who knowingly, consciously, use others as stepping stools?”

Hmm. I wonder.

Actually, it’s the people who unknowingly□with all the best of intentions and delusions of just cause□use other people who are way more disturbing.

“Haha! But you’re a good guy, right?”

I was just laughed at.

Thankfully, whether or not I’m a good guy has nothing to do with anything. Instead, it’s like this: it’s not about two different ways of thinking, it’s about different ways of living. About the absolute and enormous difference between people who can get through life without even needing to walk over others and those who aren’t even worth walking over. In the end, I think that’s what it’s about.

For instance, a painter without a style.

For instance, a scholar whose studies are complete.

For instance, a chef who has already tasted success.

For instance, a fortune-teller who has transcended too far.

The women on that island were far too different.

Both the host and the guests were of a hopelessly different breed, of an unstoppably different breed, of a different breed you wouldn’t think to stop, just of a different breed. Their existence was so out of reach, so distant that you could never even hope to muster a desire to approach it.

And.

“In other words, this is a question of ‘What is genius, and what isn’t?’ Now, being incompetent□it’s better, really. If you can be completely oblivious. To be so oblivious as to never think for a second about one’s purpose in life, to never think about the meaning of life, to never think about the value of life. Then this world would be a paradise. Calm, peaceful, and serene. Trivial things would be major and major things trivial, and life could be lived to its fullest.”

Surely that was indeed the case.

The world is harsh to the brilliant. The world is harsh to the competent.

The world is harsh to the beautiful. The world is harsh to the attentive.

The world is kind to the inferior. The world is kind to the incompetent.

The world is kind to the soiled. The world is kind to the obtuse.

But if you figure that out, if you realize that, it’s already over right then. It’s a problem with no solutions and no interpretation. It’s over before it’s begun, and by the time it’s over, it’s complete. I guess it’s that kind of story.

For instance.

“Essentially, people live in one of two ways. Either they live in awareness of their own worthlessness, or they live in awareness of the worthlessness of the world. Two ways. Either you allow your value to be absorbed by the world, or you chisel away at the world’s value and make it your own.”

The value of the world and your own worth.

Which should take priority?

The world being boring or yourself being boring.

Which is more palatable?

There’s bound to be some amount of ambiguity and uncertainty.

Are there really any defined criteria there?

Is it really just a choice between A and B?

Do you have to choose?

“Where does genius begin and end?”

Where does truth begin and with whom does it end?

With whom does truth begin and where does it end?

You mustn’t ask.

I was treated to a cynical smile.

“So, how about you?”

Well.

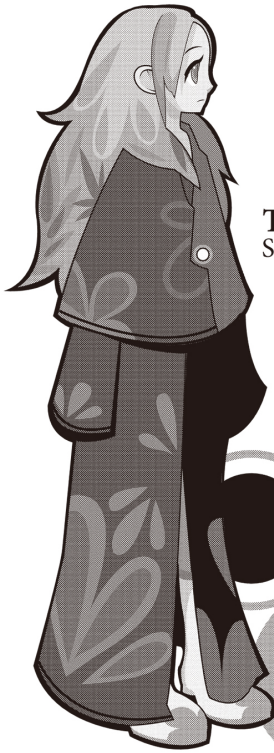
“How does the world look to you?”

To me, after having experienced that island. To me, there next to the blue. To me, now with this person before my eyes□it wasn’t worth the trouble of even thinking of an answer because it was just innocuous nonsense.

And so I said nothing.

Instead, I looked away and thought of something else.

Just how did the world look through this person’s eyes? Just how did she, meanwhile, see me?



THIRD DAY (1)
Savant Ultramarine

TOMO KUNAGISA
Genius Techie

0

Don’t be so edgy.

Relax, okay?

1

The third morning of our life on Wet Crow’s Feather Island was just greeting us. I awoke in a daze, trying to distinguish between the dreams I had just had and the reality yet to come.

The high, rectangular window admitted just a bit of light, so the room still remained dim. Since the room had no lights, I would just have to wait for it to get brighter. The sun had only just risen, and it was maybe around six a.m., judging by my internal clock. I suspect this way of determining the time has no more than a fifteen-minute margin of error. But even supposing I was an hour off, it’s not like it would be a problem.

“Getting up,” I mumbled, and slowly rose from bed.

The room was mostly empty, its only furnishings a chair and a futon. Aside from that, it was completely bare. Its high ceilings gave it an even more spacious feel and that “hollow” atmosphere that evokes so vividly images of a prison cell or something. I couldn’t help but feel a little bit like an inmate on death row. It was the second time in my life I’d woken up with that feeling.

But while this was in fact not a prison cell, neither was it originally a bedroom. It was formerly a storage space. When I asked Akari to show me the smallest room in the mansion, this was where she brought me. The smallest room. Even so, it was infinitely bigger than my room at the lodging house. Boy, was that ever depressing.

“Nah…it’s past depressing.”

Now then.

I switched my cognitive channel from Death Row Inmate Mode to Routine Mode.

Wondering what time it really was, I glanced at my wristwatch, but the LCD screen displayed nothing. Maybe the batteries had died while I was sleeping. But wait, I’d changed them just a little while ago. There had to be some other problem. Well, I could always ask Kunagisa to fix it.

Clearing my sleep-fogged mind, I did a couple of simple stretches and then left the room. I walked around for a while. The carpet was thick, bright red, and looked like (and most probably was) super-high quality. It eventually led to the spiral staircase, which is where I bumped into Rei and Akari.

“Oh, good morning. You two are up early.”

It was only common courtesy to greet them, but they simply passed by with no more acknowledgment than a silent head-bow.

“…Guess they’re the quiet type.”

To be fair, they were probably working, and I wasn’t exactly a “guest,” per se, so I just had to live with their lukewarm response. If I expected anything more out of them, I’d have to throw my arms out wide and cry out, “How you feelin’, my freaky people?!” And, frankly, I didn’t care to put myself on the line like that.

Rei Handa and Akari Chiga were maids employed at the mansion. Rei was the “head maid,” Akari her subordinate. And there were two other maids at the mansion, of the same rank as Akari. A total of four maids. Considering who owned the mansion, and the size of

the mansion, it seemed as if a staff of four maids would be too small. But these women carried out their duties with the swiftness and skill of true specialists.

The mistress of the mansion, and the person these maids served, was Iria Akagami. She was the proprietress of the island, as well as the mansion. And furthermore, she was the one who had invited me and Kunagisa here.

“Ah, right… It’s not like I got invited…”

At any rate, just how old was Akari?

You could tell just by looking at Rei that she was probably in her late twenties. It’s not easy for kids like me to tell exactly how old a woman that age is, but that’s definitely the impression I got from her. Akari was the real challenge. I didn’t think she was younger than me, but still, she looked ridiculously young. She was one of those women you see downtown who can get away with paying half-price for everything when they’re actually adults. I wonder if she has a thing for young guys, I thought somewhat nonsensically (no, it was sheer nonsense) as I went up the spiral staircase and headed down the second-floor hall.

I was headed for Kunagisa’s room.

Two days ago, when we arrived at the island, a room had of course been prepared for Kunagisa, but not for me. This was to be expected: even I had had no idea I would be visiting this weird little island until that very morning, when Kunagisa called me.

Akari prepared a room for me at the last minute. But I’d politely refused. Why? If you saw what lay beyond the door I was about to open, the reason would be obvious.

I knocked once, then went ahead and opened it.

The interior was vast. Pure white carpet and pure white wallpaper complemented pure white furniture. Even I knew that white reflects light. Kunagisa was crazy about the color white, so they had decorated this room this way deliberately. In the center of the room

was a luxurious sofa and a wooden table. A chandelier hung from the uncomfortably high ceiling. The bed was like something straight out of a movie about royalty set in medieval times; it even had a canopy.

“Yeah, I’d never get any sleep here…”

And so I had Akari show me to the storage room on the first floor. Meanwhile Kunagisa, lacking my more delicate sensibilities, lay there drowsily on her pure white sheets.

Looking at the enormous, antique, mechanical clock on her wall (also ever-so-thoughtfully selected in white), I saw that it was, in fact, a little past six, just as I’d guessed.

Pondering what to do, I sat on the side of her bed, enjoying the feeling of the thick, fluffy carpet beneath my feet.

Kunagisa rolled over.

Her eyes opened, just slightly.

“…Hmm? Oh… Iichan?” she spoke my nickname, with the usual diminutive.

Whether it was because she sensed my presence, she woke up. She pushed her mussed, Hawaiian-blue hair away from her face and regarded me with sleepy eyes. “Oh, ahhh, Iichan… Ummm… You came to wake me up? Thankoo.”

“Actually I came here to tuck you in, but what’s this? Tomo sleeping at nighttime? That’s pretty rare. Or did you just get to bed?” If that was the case I’d have to apologize.

“Uh-uh.” She shook her head. “I think I slept for three hours. Cuz y’know, yesterday, well, some stuff happened, Iichan. Give me five more seconds… … …Good morning! Ah, it’s a bright, brisk morning, isn’t it?!”

She sat up, her petite little body popping up. Flashing me an ear-to-ear grin, she extended one arm with her palm open, striking an “egg” pose straight out of the eponymous magazine. “Huh? Hey, it’s

not bright out at all. I don't like this. I like for the sun to be way high up in the sky when I wake up in the morning."

"You're talking about the afternoon."

"Either way, that was some good sleep." Ignoring me, she kept on talking. "I'm pretty sure I got to bed at three a.m. Some really bad stuff happened yesterday and I just huffed off to bed. Y'know, cuz sleep is the best thing when you're feeling really terrible. It's like sleep is the sole salvation God bestowed upon mankind. Now, Iichan?"

"Yeah, Tomo?"

"Stay still for a sec."

Without even giving me time to be confused, whomp, she hugged me. Or to put it more accurately, she draped herself on me, burdening me with the entirety of her bodyweight. She rested her tiny head on my right shoulder, with our bodies stuck together, her slender arms wrapped around my neck.

Squeeze.

Not that she was heavy.

"Um, Miss Kunagisa?"

"Ree-chaar-ging."

Evidently she was recharging. Thus, no moving allowed. I gave up on resisting and supported her weight.

But hey, what was I, an electrical outlet or something?

Looking at Kunagisa, I noticed she had slept with her coat on. As far as I knew, she wore it all the time, indoors and outdoors, summer and winter. A jet-black men's coat. On a girl of Kunagisa's height, the large-sized coat easily touched the floor. But she seemed to be madly in love with it anyway. I had told her millions of times to at least take it off when she's sleeping, but to no avail. One thing was for sure: Tomo Kunagisa did things her own way.

In that sense, she was kind of like me.

“… … …Okay, thanks,” she said, and finally let go of me. “Battery full. Now, let’s go face another day.”

With a grunt she got out of bed, blue hair fluttering. She walked over to the computers by the window opposite her bed. They were the three computers she had brought from her home in Shirosaki. All three were tower models. The two on the left and right were of typical size, the one in the middle was exceptionally large. They were all white, of course. I just didn’t get why she was so into a color that was so easy to get dirty.

The three computers were on a U-shaped rack, with a cushiony swiveling chair in the center. Kunagisa plopped down in the chair and leaned back. That way she could simultaneously control all three computers. But no matter how you counted it up, she still had only two hands. Why she would ever think to use three keyboards at the same time was beyond me.

I looked over her shoulder. The three keyboards were neither ASCII nor JIS nor Oasis, but instead some weird, mysterious key alignment. But to question the unnaturalness of it would be futile. For an engineering whiz like Tomo Kunagisa, designing a keyboard from scratch was probably like a walk in the park.

Incidentally, Kunagisa didn’t use a mouse. Because “they’re a total waste of time.” But to a novice like me, the sight of a mouseless computer was unnerving, just totally impossible to get used to. Not that that’s the worst feeling in the world.

“Iichan.”

“Yeah?”

“Tie my hair up.”

Got it. I went up to her chair. I slipped some hair bands off her arm and tied her hair into two braids.

“Man, wash your hair already. My fingers are getting oily here.”

“I hate taking baths. Cuz y’know, your hair gets all wet and stuff.”

“Well, of course. Look at this, the blue is getting dark.”

“I can’t see my own head. Heheheh, if I leave it like it is, it’ll turn ultramarine. Thankoo, Iichan,” she said, hiding her lower lip with a smile. An innocent, unguarded, and confounding smile.

“Uh, no problem, really.”

Even as we talked, her fingers never stopped moving. They moved with the accuracy of a machine at a constant rhythm with every keystroke. Her movements flowed so smoothly it was as if she were unconsciously carrying out some preplanned assignment in some preprogrammed way. Incomprehensible English text and numerals streamed along on all three monitor displays at an unbelievable pace.

“Tomo, what are you up to, anyway? You just got up.”

“Mmm, well, I don’t think you’d get it even if I told you.”

“Hmm. You really need all three PCs to do it?”

She gave me a perplexed look when I said that. “Iichan, this one in the middle isn’t a PC, it’s a workstation.”

“What’s a workstation? It’s not a PC?”

“Nope, it’s different. Well, I guess PCs and workstations are similar in that they’re both intended for individual use, but, it’s like, workstations are way more top-of-the-line.”

“Ah, so a workstation is like a super-good PC?” I said, openly displaying my ignorance.

She groaned. “Iichan, a PC is a PC and a workstation is a workstation. They’re both GPCs, but think of them as two completely different things.”

“What’s a GPC?”

She looked at me as if I were some kind of a caveman. “Iichan, you don’t know anything, do you…” she said ambiguously. “What exactly were you doing in Houston those five years?”

“Other things.”

“Phwee. Okay…” she said, tilting her head. Then she resumed her work as if a switch had been toggled in her brain. Letters and numbers that looked like hocus-pocus to me continued to stream by on the displays.

I wanted her to tell me a little more about the different classifications or what have you, but I’m not really that intellectually curious. Besides, it would be rude to interrupt whatever she was working on. That, and, following this sui generis nerdy cupcake’s explanations seemed as if it would just lead to a headache, so with that I ended the discussion. I massaged her shoulders for a bit, then decided to borrow her sink, where I washed my face and changed my clothes.

“Hey, Tomo, I’m gonna go for a walk.”

Without looking up from her work, she gave me a halfhearted wave. The other hand kept on tapping keys.

I shrugged and left the room.

2

I'd be lying if I said I knew all that much about the Akagami Foundation. They're not exactly the most well-publicized organization in the world. Plus, since they mostly operated out of the Kanto region, someone like me who was born in Kobe, raised in Houston, and living in Kyoto wouldn't know that much about them.

Putting it simply, the Akagamis were a storied zaibatsu, a clan of business barons. Maybe they engaged in commerce of some sort, maybe they were situated in a system where money just poured in on its own. I'm not sure what exactly it is that they did, but whatever it was, one thing was for sure: the Akagami Foundation was loaded.

Holding real estate not just in Japan but all over the world, the Akagami Foundation was the owner of Wet Crow's Feather Island as well. And the owner of the Western-style mansion found in the center of the island was none other than Iria Akagami.

The granddaughter of the current head of the Akagami Foundation, as her name suggested. A born-and-bred pedigreed princess, for whom no obsequious praise is too obsequious. In line to inherit enormous wealth and unbelievable power and to rule over a great many underlings.

But then, the very head of the Foundation had disowned her. So all of that was best expressed in the past tense.

Disowned.

I don't know what she did to deserve it, but it must have been something big. Supposedly she was permanently removed from the main family five years ago, at the age of sixteen. At that time, the head of the family left her with a small severance package (which was probably still an unimaginable sum to a regular joe like me)

and this little island, floating around in the Sea of Japan.

In other words, she had been marooned.

Maybe these days that seems old-fashioned. But far be it for me to butt into other people's ways of doing things. Especially when those people are a foundation that resides in a different world.

Anyway, Iria had spent the last five years here with her four maids, not once setting foot off the island. Five years on this godforsaken island in the middle of nowhere, with no amusements, no nothing. In a sense, it was life in hell, though I would speculate that it was also just a little like life in heaven. Iria, however, didn't seem to be feeling lonely or bored.

Indeed, you could say it was to stave off her boredom that Kunagisa had been invited to the island. Of course, it wasn't just Kunagisa. It would be no exaggeration to say that Akane, Maki, Yayoi, and Kanami had all been brought here just so that Iria wouldn't feel bored.

"Well, okay, that would be a bit of an exaggeration…"

Anyway.

Forbidden to leave the island, Iria said, "Well, if that's how it is," and proceeded to invite, as her guests, the world's most prominent figures. Now, if "prominent figures" sounds a little weird, let me try putting it another way. Iria had decided to invite so-called "geniuses" to her mansion. It was a remarkably simple formula: if she couldn't go to them, they could come to her.

Famous and unknown alike, those who possessed genuine talent and skill were summoned by Iria, one after another. Naturally, all expenses, including accommodations, were covered. In fact, visitors to the island were often given money, so we're talking about some real largesse.

To me, it seemed like Iria was going for that whole ancient Greek salon image, collecting and cavorting with all these artists and geniuses and thereby living a fruitful life. To be sure, it wasn't the

most typical idea around, but yes, there was something wonderful about it.

The small solitary island had nothing apart from the mansion and hills and woods□but maybe that was perfect for worldweary men and women of talent who needed to rest both the body and the mind, and Iria's plan has been a tremendous success.

Now then.

I was walking around aimlessly on this empty island, basking in the woods' aroma, and it was near a cherry blossom tree pretty far away from the mansion that I ran into Shinya.

"Ah…or should I say, hi," he greeted me, raising his hand. "You're quite the early bird there, uh…what was your name again? Sorry, my memory's a little weak, y'see."

He had a good four inches on me, and his designer clothes were much better than mine. His expression was mild-mannered, and his way of speaking was mild-mannered. Putting aside his attire and height, though, whether or not Shinya really was mild-mannered, I couldn't say. I don't have the skill to judge someone just based on their appearance, and I'm not so incompetent as to jump to conclusions after knowing someone for just a couple of days.

"I don't believe I ever told you," I answered with a shrug. "I'm just Tomo Kunagisa's sidekick. No need for an accoutrement to have a name, am I right?"

"That's awfully modest of you. Not that it's any wonder, being on this island. But speaking of sidekicks, I suppose I'm in the same boat as you," Shinya said and smirked.

Yes, Shinya and I were no more than tagalongs. It probably goes without saying at this point, but I wasn't here walking around on this island because I was any kind of genius. Tomo Kunagisa was the "genius" here, and I was nothing more than her attendant. If she hadn't said to me, "Iichan, it turns out I'll be going to some island, so come with me, 'kay?" right about now I would've been in my four-and-a-half-tatami-sized room in Kyoto getting ready for my

college classes.

No question about it: the guest of honor was Kunagisa.

Tomo. Let's just make that clear.

Now then, as for whom Shinya was accompanying, well, she was right under the cherry blossom tree. With those thoughtful, thoughtless eyes, she gazed at the fluttering cherry blossom petals.

She had blue eyes and golden hair. Her dress, pale in color, would have suited a celluloid French doll and was accented with dazzling jewelry. Just one of her necklaces or bracelets was likely worth more than my liver. Even if I sold off every part of my body I still couldn't pay for it.

Kanami Ibuki. One of the geniuses.

Having, supposedly, suffered problems with her legs from birth, she was confined to a wheelchair. And thus Shinya, as her caretaker, had tagged along on the trip. As I'd heard it, until a few years ago, she had also been totally blind. Her blue eyes were not a sign of foreign blood.

Kanami was a painter.

Even I, without the slightest knowledge of that field whatsoever, had heard of her. She had earned a reputation as a painter who didn't have a style. I had never actually seen any of Kanami's paintings, but I thought that maybe she was gazing at the cherry blossoms in that way so as to later portray them on canvas.

"What's she doing?"

"As you can see, she's watching the cherry blossoms. It won't be long before the petals fall. She has a fondness for that 'moment just before death,' if you will, the ephemeral things in life."

Most of the trees on the island were evergreens, but for some reason, there was one cherry blossom tree. It looked quite old, and the fact that there was only one on the whole island was nothing short of bizarre. Most likely, Iria had transplanted it here.

“So they say dead bodies are buried under cherry blossom trees,” I remarked.

“How hackneyed.”

Ouch.

I was just trying to make conversation, but he’d cut me down. Of course, bringing up that short story was pretty hackneyed.

“Just joking,” Shinya laughed. “Personally, I think it would make more sense if that legend was about a plum tree… But then I guess it wouldn’t be a legend, but a myth? Hahaha. By the way, kid, have you gotten accustomed to the island yet? This is your third day here, right? Um, how long were you planning to stay again?”

“A week. So we have another few days.”

“Mmm, that’s too bad,” he said, with a tinge of mystery.

“What’s too bad?”

“Oh, it’s just that I hear Iria’s favorite will be coming here in a week. But if you’re leaving in four days, you’ll just miss each other, won’t you? That’s just too bad.”

“Ah, I see.”

I nodded and thought about it for a moment.

Iria’s “favorite.”

In other words, some sort of genius.

“A chef, a fortune-teller, a scholar, an artist, and a techie. What could be next?” I asked.

“Well, I haven’t heard any specifics myself, but apparently this person is capable of just about anything. Not a ‘specialist,’ but a ‘generalist.’ Hikari tells me this person is as sharp as a tack and full of knowledge, and has lightning reflexes.”

Hmm. What a totally amazing person. Let's assume it was just some ridiculously over-the-top rumor. The fact that such a rumor even existed suggested that this particular genius wasn't just anyone. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't intrigued.

"Couldn't hurt to meet this person, you know? What do you say to asking for an extension on your visit? I'm sure Iria would more than welcome you."

"Sounds nice and all, but…" I probably looked less than excited. "To be honest, this island is a little stifling. For a mediocrity like me, I mean."

Shinya guffawed boisterously. "Now, now. Now, now, now, now, now there, kid. Is that how it is? Kanami and Akane and all of them haven't given you a complex, have they?"

An inferiority complex. Even supposing it wasn't something you could put so bluntly, what I felt was certainly something similar. Shinya gave me several pats on the shoulder.

"There's no reason to feel inferior to that lot. Okay? Let's keep it together, brother! Whether it be Kanami…" Kanami glanced up from under the cherry blossom tree. "Whether it be Akane, Yayoi, or even Kunagisa, if they were to play the two of us in rock-paper-scissors, they would only win one out of three times. I suppose Maki would be an exception there, but nevertheless."

"That's such a bald way to put it."

Not to mention Shinya had just referred to his own employer as part of "that lot." I'm not saying they were at each other's throats or anything, but maybe Shinya and Kanami weren't quite the best of friends.

"Talent isn't such a big deal. In fact, I, for one, am glad I don't have any. Talent isn't worth spit."

"Why's that?"

"If you've got a talent, you've got to exert effort. Being mediocre is a breeze. Having 'nothing to master' is an advantage, if you ask

me," Shinya said with a cynical shrug. "I think we got a little off-topic… Anyway, I don't think it would be a terrible thing if you were able to extend your stay, if you ask me. And hey, just maybe this 'generalist' will beat us in rock-paper-scissors all three times."

"Well, I'll talk it over with Kunagisa…" It would hardly be right for the tagalong to decide something like this on his own.

"I bet," Shinya said. "You're a lot like me," he added, looking me in the eye.

His gaze was deeply disconcerting. It made me uncomfortable like I was being examined inside out.

"Me and you? Alike? How do you mean? In what way?"

"Don't sound so unhappy about it. In particular, you're practically identical in holding the idea that you are an accoutrement to this world."

Seemingly with no intention of explaining himself any further, he broke his gaze and looked back at Kanami. Predictably, Kanami was still staring at the cherry blossoms with complete concentration. She was surrounded by a sort of transcendence, as if just that one spot was isolated from the rest of the world. She had the air of being unapproachable, even sacred.

"So Kanami's been painting even since coming here?"

"Well, it's more like she came to this island to paint. That's really all she does, after all. I suppose you could say she lives to paint. Can you believe it?"

He spoke with a tinge of frustration, but if you took his words at face value, it sounded like an incredibly enviable existence; a life where what you want to do and what you have to do are directly connected. It was a way of life I could never even hope for. I, who had discovered neither what I wanted nor what I had to do.

"…"

I noticed that Shinya was watching me with a wicked smile, like he

had just remembered a prank. I recoiled a little. I was getting a bad feeling, like a premonition. And then Shinya, with a look on his face as if to say, “I’ve just had a revelation from God,” clapped his hands deliberately.

“That’s right! It’s such a prime opportunity, so why don’t you try modeling?” He set me aside as I stood at a loss for words and unable to comprehend his, and faced Kanami. “Hey!” he called. “Kanami! This fella here says he wants to be your model!”

“Wait, Shinya!” Finally grasping the situation, I spun in front of him. “I can’t just, I mean, give me a break!”

“Now, now, why are you so embarrassed? That hardly suits your character.”

“Leave my character alone…”

I was catastrophically averse to this sort of thing. Asking Kanami to paint me? That was incredibly intimidating. But Shinya blew off my protest with a simple “Now, now, don’t be shy,” and waited for an answer from Kanami.

Kanami adjusted the direction of her wheelchair and took a look at me with her blue eyes. She scanned me up and down, from the tip of my head to the tips of my feet, observing me, assessing me, and said, “So you want me to paint you?”

She sounded truly irritated.

This was a difficult question to answer. With someone as talented as Kanami, the simple act of hesitating would have been rude. I was weak in these situations. A real pushover. A nineteen year old who’s spent his life going with the flow has not the power to alter the flow of a tale.

“Yes, absolutely, if you don’t mind,” I said.

Kanami simply looked disinterested. “Fine then. Come by the atelier this afternoon,” she said, and swiveled her wheelchair back toward the cherry blossoms. She spoke with heartfelt apathy, but at least she was accepting the offer.

“Well, that’s settled then. Are you free this afternoon?” Shinya said, oddly joyful.

I told him I was free and decided to get going before I got into any more trouble.

I returned to the mansion and visited Kunagisa’s room once again. Kunagisa was just as I had left her, sitting in her revolving chair, her three PCs (I mean, two PCs and one workstation) in front of her. Right now she was focused on the workstation, and the two PCs had their power switched off.

“What were you up to, Tomo?”

No reply.

I went up to her from behind and tugged both her braids. “Augh,” she uttered in a strange voice, seeming to at last notice my presence. Without changing her position, she gaped at me in bewilderment. Surely I appeared upside down in her eyes.

“Yooo, Iichan. You’re back from your walk.”

“Yeah, well… Say, is that a Mac?”

The monitor on the workstation opposite Kunagisa was displaying a Mac OS screen for some reason. As far as I had heard, Mac OS only worked on Macs.

“Yeah, it’s Mac OS. Y’see, there are some applications that only run on Mac OS, so I’m running it on a virtual machine.”

“Virtual machine?”

“Basically I’m making the workstation think there’s a Mac inside it. In other words, I’m tricking the software. Of course Windows is in here, too. Most OS’s are installed on this workstation, so it can do anything.”

“Ah…” I didn’t really get it. “This is a dumb question, but how are Mac and Windows different, anyway?”

She gave my truly amateurish question a moment's thought. "They're different because different people use them," she answered, with an air of precision.

"Well, yeah, that's true, but… Well, forget about that. So an OS is like the core software, right? I think that's right. So then it's like this computer has multiple personalities?"

"That's a pretty apt simile."

"So then that PC, er, workstation, what's its core core OS? Like with multiple personalities you have a 'main' personality, right?"

"Geocide."

"Never heard of that. Is it like Oonix?"

"That's Unix, with a 'yoo' sound. Come on, you studied abroad; you should know not to pronounce the alphabet like romanized Japanese, Iichan. It makes you sound so stupid. Uh, well, it is compatible with Unix. But it's an original OS developed by a friend of yours truly."

"A friend…"

Kunagisa's friend. A friend of Kunagisa's who could've developed an original operating system had to be part of the Team. That notorious Team.

Several years back, in the last century, during the time when the Japanese network was still underdeveloped, that group appeared. Or, no, "appeared" isn't the correct expression. They never for an instant let their visage, nor their shadow, nor even a whiff of them grace the public eye. They never announced their name; whatever name they had ever been known by had been applied by others. Whether you called them a virtual club, cyberterrorists, a crack unit, or a gang that made mountains out of molehills, it didn't matter to them, and they probably wouldn't respond.

They were completely peerless, species unknown. How many people were there, and just what types of people comprised the Team? These things were all shrouded in mystery.

And what did they do?

Anything.

They did anything, that was all you could say about it. They did so much of everything, there was nothing they didn't do. They wreaked havoc, havoc, and more havoc. I wasn't in Japan at the time, so I didn't get to see it firsthand, but they say it was such full-on, ludicrous havoc that it was practically refreshing, lending no hint as to their motives or aims. Beginning with pure hacking and cracking, they also had their hands in corporate advising and fixer fraud. It's also quietly speculated that, back then, they controlled a number of large corporations.

But you couldn't say they existed solely as a nuisance. For better or worse, it was thanks to them that the overall level of network technology improved drastically. You could even say they hammered it out. If you looked at it on a micro level, sure there were losses, but in the big picture, the gains outweighed them tenfold.

But, of course, "the powers that be" saw them as little more than pesky, law-breaking criminals, and your usual hackers and crackers didn't appreciate the competition. Thus the Team was always despised and pursued. But it was never caught, and without ever revealing "exactly what it wanted," sometime last year, suddenly and without anything in particular having happened, it was never heard from again. It was as though they had just burned out and vanished.

"…"

"Yo, what's wrong, Iichan? You're quiet all of a sudden."

"Nah…it's nothing."

Kunagisa giggled, her blue hair fluttering.

"……It's nothing, really."

Who would believe the leader of that unparalleled Team, which in a sense had met an anticlimactic end, was this happy-go-lucky girl

still in her teens? Exactly who in their right mind would believe something so nonsensical that couldn't even be called a sick joke?

But if that wasn't the case, Kunagisa wouldn't have been invited to this genius-ridden island as a systems and mechanical engineering specialist.

"How could I not have a complex, Shinya…"

"Huh? Did you say something?"

Kunagisa glanced up at me for a moment.

Yeah, just nonsense, I replied.

"So 'Geocide,' doesn't that mean 'Earth murder'?"

"Yup. Of all the existing OS's, it's probably the most awesome. 'Geocide as number one.' Even the RASIS is perfect."

"Sometimes I think you use difficult words just to tick me off. What's a RASIS?"

"It's an acronym for reliability, availability, serviceability, integrity, security. But of course, that's in English," she said a bit irritably. "Basically it means stability. Sure, it requires a high-performance system, but you almost never get errors. Man, that Acchan really is a genius. Heheheh!"

"'Acchan'…" She was referring to him with that familiar diminutive. "Sounds like you two are pretty close."

"Hmm? Jealous? Hmm? Hmm?" she said with a peculiarly pleased tone and naughty smirk. "It's okay. I like you bestest of all."

"Ah, right. 'Preciate that." I shrugged and tried to change the subject. "But if it's such an amazing OS, why not market it? If it sold like Windows, you'd make a fortune."

"No can do. You know about increasing returns, right? With that much of a head start, we'd never catch up. Business goes beyond skill or talent."

Increasing returns. The law of economics that states “the more you have, the more you get,” a death knell for the havenots. It had been awhile since I’d learned it, so I didn’t remember it very clearly, but to put it simply, “Once there is a gap in practice, it’s impossible to bury that gap.” Whether it be in regards to skill or money, it seemed to make no difference.

“Besides, just creating Geocide satisfied Acchan. He knows how to be satisfied with self-satisfaction.”

“Hey, he sounds like a happy guy.”

“Even if that wasn’t the case, I don’t think it would be possible to market it. Even though it’s just core software, it requires some pretty outrageous specs. Seriously astronomical figures. Even my machine just barely cuts it.”

“Hmm. How many gigs is your hard disk? About a hundred?”

“One hundred tera.”

Different unit. “Tera…the opposite of pico, so…a thousand times a gig?”

“Nope, 1,024 times.”

Nitpicky chick.

“Man,” I said, “I’ve never seen a hard disk like that…”

“To be specific, it’s not a hard disk; it’s holographic memory. Unlike hard disks, which record data as lines, it’s a medium that records two-dimensionally. It’s capable of one tera per second rapid transfer. It might take a little…a lot more time before it goes on the market. This is the kind of media they’re using in the development of space technology.”

She had those kinds of connections, too?

What an unpleasant community.

“Of course, this goes for the machine’s capacity as well, but if the

motherboard specs aren't customized homebrew as well, you're probably out of luck. Acchan just makes things without considering any of the surrounding circumstances, y'see. So they just end up like this. He doesn't try to suit things to other people."

"Homebrew motherboard? There are people who do that?"

"Like yours truly, for one."

She indicated herself with her thumb.

Right. She was an engineer, after all. She must've been the culprit providing her "teammates" with the hardware and software that were to be their "weapons." If you thought about it, it was fairly disturbing. It was one thing to develop a seemingly unmarketable OS like that, but to take it and build your own motherboard for it was just plain freakish.

"Mr. Earth Murder aside, haven't you ever considered selling this stuff? Like that motherboard you're so proud of?"

"I'm the self-satisfied type, too. How 'bout you, Iichan?"

"Hmm, I wonder."

Regardless of talent or lack thereof, in the end all people are classified into two groups: those who pursue and those who create. My own case notwithstanding, Kunagisa was overwhelmingly the latter.

"Besides, as far as money is concerned, I've got plenty and then some. I'm not thinking about making any more right now."

"Ah, no wonder."

That was true. Kunagisa wasn't in a lowly position that demanded she go into business at this late date. It wouldn't be much of an exaggeration to say she spent money like it was water. A nineteen year old occupying a high-class, two-floor condo in Shirosaki and spending money as fast as she could. I didn't know how many people out there had more money than Kunagisa, but surely few individuals spent as much.

Between the Akagami Foundation and the Kunagisa family, to say who held the greater power was beyond the realm of my cogitative capabilities, but either way, what was certain was that they possessed enough of a fortune to enjoy the best things in life and still get back change over nine to the ninth power to the power of nine lives.

Speaking of which, Kunagisa resembled the mistress of this island, Iria, in that she, too, was semi-disowned by the main family. Perhaps they were similar people. In the three days I had spent on the island, signs pointed to the contrary, but, well, they were both eccentric, that was for sure. So much so that it would have been impossible for them to blend in or serve as organization people.

"…"

Surely that's how it was.

In which case, this island…

The meaning of this so-called island of wet crow's feathers…

Kunagisa returned to her typing.

"I'm gonna go have breakfast," I told her. "What about you?"

"No, thanks. Not hungry. It's mating season. Iichan, go ahead on your own. Eat for me, too."

Gotcha, I said, and headed for the dining room.

3

Akane was in the dining room.

So I tensed up.

She sat alone at the round dining table with her legs crossed, the elegance of her pose almost un-Japanese, having her breakfast. Or no, she had already finished breakfast and was enjoying an after-meal coffee.

“Oh! Good morning!”

It was the bright and lively voice of Akari in the midst of cleaning the dining room. No, wait, it wasn’t her. Akari never greeted me bright and lively. That wasn’t the Akari I knew. Which meant…

“Hi, Hikari,” I said, determining that it was her. Evidently I was correct, as she grinned at me and bowed.

Akari Chiga and Hikari Chiga.

They were sisters. Twins. In fact, they were triplets, along with their silent younger sister Teruko. Teruko apparently had poor eyesight and was recognizable by her black-rimmed glasses. Akari and Hikari, however, were perfectly identical, from the length of their hair to their clothes, to the point that they weren’t just similar, but the same.

But unlike Akari, Hikari was incredibly approachable, generous, and goodnatured. Even though I wasn’t a true “guest,” she treated me like everyone else.

“Breakfast? Wait one moment, please,” she said, then spun around and hustled off to the kitchen. She must be so good at spinning because she’s small, I thought.

With Hikari gone, I was suddenly left alone with Akane.

After a √2 second's hesitation, I went ahead and took a seat near her. I thought to greet her, but she seemed completely immersed in thought, mumbling to herself in a semiaudible voice, not even looking in my direction. It was as though she hadn't noticed me. What in the world was she thinking about? I pricked my ears to listen in.

"Sente 9-6, pawn… Gote 8-4, pawn… Sente same, pawn… Gote 8-7, pawn… Sente 8-4, rook… Gote 2-6, pawn… Sente 3-2, silver general… Gote 9-5, pawn… Sente 4-4, bishop… Gote 5-9, gold general, back… Sente 2-7, knight…"

Meaning unknown.

She wasn't one of the Seven Fools for nothing; even the things they mutter to themselves are different, I thought, thoroughly impressed. But listening closely, it sounded like she was chronicling a match of shogi. Wow…blind shogi.

And by herself, no less.

Is this what she always did in the morning?

"Gote 2-3, pawn, promote, Sente forfeits," she said, and glanced over at me. "Ah, I was wondering. It was you. Good morning."

"Good morning."

"Heh heh. Isn't shogi tough? The pieces have a wider possibility of moves than in chess. I was playing Gote just now. It was a close victory."

"Huh."

You could go first or not in single-player shogi? Maybe Akane was able to partition her brain like a dolphin. Yeah, it seemed likely for someone like her.

"Are you good at shogi, or chess, whichever?" she asked.

“I wouldn’t say so, no.”

“Hmm, is that so?”

“Reading other people’s minds isn’t my forte.”

“No? Hmm, I suppose not. You’ve got that kind of face,” she nodded. “I saw you from the window a little earlier. Out for a morning walk, were you?”

“Yes, a walk in the woods.”

“Ah, a walk in the woods, how nice. Very nice. The phytoncide released by the trees has a bactericidal effect and such.”

What the hell?

In Houston, Texas, in America, there’s a research facility called the ER3 System. There, brilliant minds from around America, nay, around the world, gather, and it is referred to as an ultimate bastion of learning that delves into anything that could be called a field of study or research, from economics to history, political science to cultural studies, physics and higher mathematics to biochemistry, electric and mechanical engineering to parapsychology.

It’s also known as the Comprehensive Research Center. It was where those who loved learning and research above all else, you could say crazies, assembled. A nest for the inhuman whose desire for knowledge exceeded even their natural, biological desires. An entirely nonprofit organization, they dared not sell their knowledge or research findings, and they were in a sense a closed and introverted clandestine organization.

There were only four basic rules.

Have no pride.

Have no principles.

Have no attachments.

No whining.

They were to unbegrudgingly cooperate with one another on all things under the sun to the fullest of their ability, to never traffic in trifles even if the world should perish, and to never quit halfway even if the universe were to fail.

The final destination for those who wanted to do research, who wanted to know, who had to know, with means and end in complete harmony, it was the ER3 System. The people gathered there ranged from highly esteemed college professors to frontline researchers and amateur scholars, a truly principleless assembly of all manner of individuals. Their roster was so bizarre that elements of the media ridiculed them as a cult of overeducated loonies.

But their research had yielded great rewards: the demystification of Dalevio nonlinear optics, the overwhelming advancement of volume hologram technology, and more recently the establishment of the near-magical DOP as a sensory technology were all thanks to the ER3. Not the work of individuals, but rather team efforts, and nonprofit work at that, they declined all awards and other various honors, and thus didn't draw much attention, but their reputation within the academic world was certainly high. It was a research center with a relatively brief history□not even a century old□but it was already globally networked.

And within this research center existed a transcendent group known as the Seven Fools. Seven individuals that the selected selected as "the seven who were closest to the world's answers." They were truly "geniuses among geniuses."

One of them was Akane Sonoyama.

She had beautiful black hair, cut ruler-precise to lend her an air of intellectualism. She was tall for a woman, with a stylishly slender build. There was no part of her that wasn't overflowing with a handsome femininity. She stood at the pinnacle of female Japanese academics.

The ER3 System is relatively unknown in Japan. The fact that the ER3 itself is so exclusive is no doubt part of the reason for this, but the main reason is likely that the uncategorizable nature of the center doesn't fit with the Japanese way of doing things.

Nevertheless, Akane was the first purely Japanese person (in her twenties, no less) to rise to the ranks of the ER3 Seven Fools. She ought to have been a household name in her own country.

Now, this may all beg the question of why a purely Japanese person like me knows so much about this. But there's no special reason, really. It's not that I'm particularly well-informed, it's just that the ER3 and I have crossed paths a bit.

You see, in preparation for the long-term, ER3 System implements a study-abroad program to educate the youth of the next generation. For five years, beginning with my second year of junior high school, I participated in that program, so naturally I knew of Akane Sonoyama's reputation as one of the Seven Fools and her "above the clouds" existence.

That's why I was so surprised to discover her here on this island. I'm not at all the sweet type who surrenders unconditionally at the first sniff of authority or talent, but I couldn't help but be nervous. What exactly do you say to one of the Seven Fools?

I was sitting there, all clammed up, when Akane spoke again. "By the way, that blue-haired girl□Kunagisa, I mean."

"Ah. Yes?"

"She's just lovely. Last night I had her do some maintenance on my PC. She's incredibly skilled, isn't she? We have techies at ER3 as well, but I've never seen one with such…mechanical precision. She made it look like routine work. This may sound rude, but for a moment I wondered if she was really human. No wonder Iria absolutely adores her."

"Ah, really? I hope she wasn't a bother or anything."

Akane let out a chuckle. "You sound like an escort vehicle."

An escort vehicle. That was some unfounded praise. "Do you mean 'escort personnel'?"

"Well, don't they both guard you?"

“One of them is an automobile.”

“Ah, sure,” she nodded. For all her evident ability in math and science, it seemed Japanese was not her forte. “Well, either way. She didn’t try to seduce me or anything.”

Well, naturally.

“Then again, she seemed a bit of the socially awkward type. I don’t think she listens when people are talking. And as a result, my PC evolved about two generations.”

“She’s actually gotten better. She used to be terrible to talk to. Just starting and stopping whenever she felt like it. It was pretty rough for me.”

“Hmm. If you want my opinion, I think there’s a certain charm to her unapologeticness.”

“Eh, I’m not sure I agree on that.”

“Have it your way.” Akane shrugged. “By the way, I also heard from her that you were in the ER program.”

“Ow.”

That blabbermouth had let the cat out of the bag. I’d told her to keep that quiet… Not that I wasn’t fully aware there’s no point trying to keep that girl quiet.

“You should’ve told me. We could’ve had quite a chat. I feel as if we’ve wasted two days. I don’t suppose you were holding back by any chance? Please don’t get me wrong, I’m not such a big deal.”

“No, it’s not that… I guess it was just hard to bring up. And also, even though I was in the program, I quit midway.”

The program is a ten-year curriculum. I dropped out my sixth year, this last January. From there I returned to Japan and reunited with Kunagisa. Luckily I was already qualified as a high school graduate after my second year in the program, so I was able to transfer directly to Kyoto’s Rokumeikan University.

“It’s still quite admirable,” Akane said. “Regardless of what a sprain it became for you…”

“That’s a ‘strain.’ ”

“Regardless of what a strain it became for you, the ER program’s entrance exam is a great obstacle to have overcome. You should have a little more pride about your accomplishments.”

The ER program’s entrance exam was unusually difficult. Moreover, the application guidebook said, “There are no perks. This does not guarantee your future. No one will come to rescue you. We offer only an environment in which you may sate your intellectual curiosity.” Still, elite candidates from around the world gathered to take the test. So it was true, merely passing the test was something to boast about.

But.

I hadn’t completed the curriculum.

“There’s no point when I dropped out midway. Results are everything in this world.”

“Everything in this world is a result, I happen to believe. Or are you one of those ‘a genius is a genius is a genius’ people?” she asked in a somewhat sarcastic tone. “A genius is not a rose. In Japan, you often see people who take pride simply in the effort they give, don’t you? ‘I’ve endured great hardships, regardless of the results,’ they say. They say there’s merit in effort alone. I think that’s a valid outlook. ‘Having worked hard’ is a fine result in and of itself. What I have a problem with is scum who spout absurdities like ‘I could have done that if I wanted’ or ‘I couldn’t do it because I just wasn’t trying’ or ‘I said I can do it, but that doesn’t mean I will.’ That’s all ridiculous. There really are all sorts of people in this world, huh?”

“Me, I don’t do because I couldn’t.”

“…Hmm. Heheh, it seems you’re quite the humbling person.”

“You probably mean humble.”

“Bingo.”

The right part of her lip curled up in a half-smile and she produced a pack of cigarettes from her pocket. In a graceful, fluid motion, she put one in her mouth and lit it.

“Wow, you smoke? I’m surprised.”

“Are you the type who doesn’t like women who smoke?”

“Well, no, not women particularly. Smoking is bad for your health, you know.”

“Health is bad for your smoking, you know,” she retorted, slowly exhaling smoke. There’s that Seven Fools wit, I thought, but she smirked with embarrassment. “…Mere sophistry. Don’t mind me. It’d be awful if you ended up thinking poorly of me,” she said. “Shall we change the subject? I was actually in Japan all the way through high school.”

“Really?” I was a little surprised. But if you thought about it, it was really no mystery. “Which high school?”

“Just your average prefectural school. It isn’t particularly well-known. I was in the girls’ karate club back then. It was fun enough. I didn’t like it at all at the time, but in retrospect I must have had fun. Gee, that takes me back. It’s already been more than ten years… The skirts back then were this long. I didn’t have the best grades, but I was good in math and English. That’s why I ended up at an overseas university. My family was very against it, but I defied them. After all, don’t they say, ‘If you love someone, set them ablaze’?”

“No.”

“Anyway, it was like that, so in the end I cut myself off from my family and crossed over to America on my own. It was a hell of a big move for someone like me back then.”

And thus she ended up in the Seven Fools.

She was a unique sort of Cinderella.

“So you do like math. I had a feeling,” I said.

“Well, you know, I don’t dislike it. In high school I liked how there was always one concrete answer, no vague components, so math was all I did. I liked clear-cut things. But after college, at the ER3 System, I came to realize that wasn’t necessarily the case. It’s just like shogi or chess. You just have to get a checkmate, but there are an infinite number of ways to get there. I felt as if I had been swindled or something.”

“Like when a lover shows an unfamiliar side of himself to you?”

“A romantic idea, but not exactly,” Akane answered, laughing. “But I was also a little touched, you know. In my high school days, I always figured math wouldn’t be of any use once I got into the real world, but in fact there really are cases where you have to use calculus and cubic equations and such. You use factorials in everyday life. I was definitely touched by that fact.”

“I understand.” I nodded. I really did.

She smiled in a satisfied way. “Are you a math person, too? On average, men are much more likely to be mathematically inclined than women. Supposedly because of the way their brains work.”

“Is that so?”

“Well, based on statistical data.”

“Sounds like sexist data to me.”

Besides, statistical evidence is pretty unreliable. If you roll a die one hundred times and it lands on six every single time, that doesn’t necessarily mean it’ll be a six the next time, too. I told her this, but she protested.

“If it lands on six one hundred times in a row, it’s a die that only lands on six. It’s too significant a difference to be written off as a coincidence or leaning odds. Male-female statistics are kind of like that, too… Heheh, so you’re a feminist. Or are you just being polite around me? Well, unfortunately I’m not a feminist. Listening to talk about expanding women’s rights and women’s liberation makes me

sick to my stomach. I mean, right? They're obviously spouting nonsense. Sure, it's a man's world, but it's not gender equality we need, it's equal opportunity to apply our abilities. Men and women are so different that you can practically call them genetically separate creatures. So Akane Sonoyama believes they have separate roles. Of course, that rests on the major assumption that your role and what you want to do are separate, and the minor assumption that if you have to choose between the two, what you want to do should come first. Ah, and maybe a prior medium-sized assumption that you can do what you want to do. To me it all sounds like a convenient excuse for when you can't do anything."

"There's also the factor of environment…"

"Environment, huh? But was there ever an age when women were forbidden from writing, or from sculpting? Regarding recent trends, I've become more inclined to sympathize with men. I feel as if they're closer to my own point of view, but also, until the modern day, the workplace was always exclusively man's domain, right? So it's no wonder they got angry when women wanted to butt in."

"It's just righting a wrong. Such are the pangs of birth," I said, wondering why I was having to take the feminist stance.

"Hmm," she nodded. "Maybe you're right. I don't really know. But I can understand why women get angry at men, too. If all they're doing is carrying out their roles, then there's no call for them to put on airs. The anger is called for. Just so long as they don't try to mix me up into anything. I guess what I truly want is for feminists to just do it away from me. Whatever the case may be, women are inherently a boring breed. Just like you men. Hmm, come to think of it, there are more men than women at ER3, too. Within the Seven Fools, five are men."

"Increasing returns."

"Oh?" She seemed taken aback. "I'm afraid I don't know that term in Japanese. What is it, some kind of dieting thing?"

"It means Beta lost to VHS."

“Ah, you mean the bias that occurs in economics. That’s right, to return a once male-biased world to equilibrium, you’d have to go through quite a bit of hardship. Really, there wouldn’t be any problems if men and women weren’t always acting jealous of each other. But nobody gets it, do they? Originally, discriminating just means knowing the difference…”

“Akane, coming from you this all sounds convincing. I guess you must be going through ‘quite a bit of hardship’ yourself.”

“Never,” she said flatly. “I just make a little effort.”

It was a loaded statement.

Suddenly I recalled something I had wanted to ask someone ever since I first learned of the Seven Fools’ existence at ER3.

“Say, who’s the number one smartest person in the entire ER3 System?”

In other words, who was the smartest person in the world? Akane answered with little deliberation.

“Number two is Fräulein Love.”

“And number one?”

“Come on, kid, you expect me to say it myself?”

Ow.

“Kidding, kidding. Hmm, to answer your question seriously, the person I respect the most, or in other words the person I place above myself, and all others, is probably Assistant Professor Hewlett. He’s certainly supreme.”

Almost unspeakably accomplished, he was the single greatest mind of the last century, and probably this one as well. The first and probably last man to finish mastering every subject when he was still in his single digits. Granted criminal immunity on the level of the president, his intellect was safeguarded with his nation’s whole might.

If Akane was a god from where I stood, Assistant Professor Hewlett was the very fabric of the universe.

“If he had been a woman, history would have changed course,” Akane said, looking off into the distance. It was a look of adulation.

“Sorry for the wait!”

With expert timing, Hikari appeared, pushing a cart. On top of it sat my breakfast. With experienced hands, she placed it in front of me, followed by a knife and fork on either side. “Please take your time,” she said with a bow and radiant smile, and then went off somewhere once more. It seemed she still had lots of work to do.

Nine pieces of deep-fried risotto balls on lettuce. Fish soup, salad, and a sandwich made with Italian bread. Plus coffee.

“That Sashirono is hot stuff, huh?” Akane muttered, eyeing my meal.

Yayoi Sashirono.

She ran the mansion’s kitchen, but she wasn’t an employee. Indeed, she was one of the geniuses who had been invited to the island. Having already been here for over a year, at this point she was the longest-running guest. There was no doubt that many of the elite visitors to the island had come in hopes of trying her cuisine.

Officially, her specialty was Western cuisine, but she could just as skillfully do any other type, whether it be Chinese, Japanese, or what have you. She was a cooking master with whom no one in the culinary world wasn’t familiar□or so went the tales about her. Personally, I was even more ignorant about cooking as I was about art and academics, so I had sadly not even heard of Yayoi until visiting the island, but having the privilege to try her dishes three times a day plus between-meal snacks, even I came to know of her extraordinary culinary prowess.

The typical image that accompanied a first name like “Yayoi” is either that of a stuck-up know-it-all or a short, spunky girl, but this Yayoi fit neither description, instead turning out to be a dignified,

fresh breeze of a woman with short hair. With a polite manner about her, she was the unarrogant type, despite being called a genius. She was probably the most down-to-earth person on the whole island besides me. Likewise, she was the second-most amicable person. Incidentally, Hikari was first. There I go spouting nonsense.

Word had it that Yayoi possessed some power that allowed her to make any food better than any other cook, but just what was it? I was curious to know, but had yet to inquire. She spent most of the day in the kitchen (is that what you call a shut-in?) so opportunities to speak with her were rare.

I noticed that Akane was hungrily eyeing my risotto balls. After a moment of my refusing to speak up, she transferred her gaze to me. Something about her eyes was slightly different from before. Like those of a carnivore hunting prey.

“Have you ever heard that people originally didn’t acknowledge any numbers past seven?”

“…I have, as a matter of fact.”

Apparently, all numbers past seven were simply thought of as “a lot.” I had also heard in my program training that this was the fundamental reason why the Fools were limited to seven people.

“Yeah, so just looking at things objectively, if your nine risotto balls turned into eight, I don’t think it would be such a great loss.”

“And?”

“You’re dim, aren’t you? How do you ever get along with Kunagisa?”

“It’s not like that between us.”

“Don’t change the subject. You’d have one of the Seven Fools bow her head, is that it? Fine. Sashirono’s risotto balls are delicious, so gimme one. You happy?”

“…”

I slid my plate to her without saying anything.

Akane began to gleefully pop down the risotto balls, one after another. Before you knew it, they were all gone. Apparently by "one" she meant "one plate."

Well, I was never one to eat a whole lot in the morning anyway. I was supposed to eat for Kunagisa, too, but it was her fault for leaving it to me.

Switching channels, I made my way to the sandwich and salad. Not to be too generic, it was really good. If you said this was the only kind of food that was served at the island (and all of it free, no less), no genius would decline. Surprisingly, even Akane was evidently in that boat.

"Now then, to get back to the subject you're so slyly avoiding," she said awfully unjustly, wiping her mouth with a napkin, "if it's 'not like that' between you two, just what is your relationship? If you were just friends, you wouldn't have come to this island together. You have school to worry about."

Indeed, by coming to the island I had missed every day of class since the college entrance ceremony. Incidentally, I also missed the entrance ceremony. In other words, well, yeah.

"I met her before I was in the program. So roughly five years ago."

"Mmm, and when you got back she turned out to be a cyberterrorist, huh? That's a sordid little tale."

Indeed.

I saw it coming even when we were thirteen years old. Nevertheless, reuniting with her after my five years of study abroad, I was honestly surprised at how little had changed from the old days. Anyone would be surprised if a girl stayed in her early teens. Of course, that was just how things seemed. In reality, she had become much more, if not grownup, human in terms of personality.

Our relationship.

Asked flat out, it was a tough question to answer. Kunagisa needed me—that much I knew. However, it didn't have to be me. It would be extremely difficult to explain those circumstances. To do so, I'd have to explain a lot about Kunagisa herself, and I didn't especially want to do that.

"Hmm," Akane nodded. "I haven't talked with Kunagisa all that much, but it seems to me she has too many shortcomings to go through everyday life… Uh, I guess I shouldn't say shortcomings. It's not like she's defective. But her focus is just so skewed. It reminds me of my friend whose kid is an idiot savant."

Savant—in French, it means a person with wisdom. I was aware that Kunagisa, too, used to be described precisely in those terms. I was all too aware of it.

"So she probably really does need a caretaker, a friend like you. There's no doubt about that. But I mean, how does that make you feel?"

I didn't have an answer.

"It seems like your relationship is almost codependent," Akane continued.

"Codependent?"

She tilted her head. "Haven't you heard the word? It's an addiction that affects human relationships. Like, for example, let's say there's a recovering alcoholic who has a caretaker by his side. He needs that caretaker, and the caretaker devotedly looks after him. But when that devotion goes to extremes, it's a sign of codependency. They get drunk on serving. You even see mild cases of it in romantic couples. Needless to say, it's not a good thing. You end up putting each other to waste. I'm not going to say you two are like that, but you might want to take care."

"Sure."

"Few things are as meaningless as prolonging a failed relationship. But still, I'm full of nothing but awe for Kunagisa's talents. Even at

ER3 we're using software that she created. Er, 'they' created, rather. But certainly I never imagined I would meet her in a place like this."

"Why are you on this island anyway?"

It wasn't like the Seven Fools had the emptiest schedules in the world.

"No real reason," she said after a few moments' silence. It was a strangely bland response, and I had to wonder. "But more important, even if you're not the best player, you at least know the rules to shogi and chess, right? Why don't we have a game while we reminisce a little more about ER3?"

"Ah…" A shogi challenge with one of the Seven Fools. Sounded interesting. "Not blind, though. My memory is famously bad." Not the greatest reputation to have, if I do say so myself. "If we can change locations, I'm in."

"I've got a board in my room. It was the first thing I bought when I got back to Japan. Hmm, I've actually got some work to do this morning. How's this afternoon?"

"Sounds good… Wait, I can't. I've already got something."

"Oh? Meeting up with Kunagisa or something? Well, if that's the case, what can you do."

"No, with Kanami."

Boom.

Akane's expression grew exceedingly stern.

Damn it, I'd forgotten. When I had first arrived on the island, Hikari had been kind enough to let me know that Akane and Kanami were on catastrophically bad terms, but because of my famously bad memory I had forgotten.

"Hmph. We're pals, so I'll give you a bit of advice. You shouldn't hang around with someone with such a vulgar occupation.

Lowering oneself like that is stupid, you know?"

"Akane, you really hate Kanami, don't you?"

"No. There's no reason for me to embrace any feelings of like or dislike toward that woman. But artists truly are a despicable race. Hmph, seriously!" She banged her hand on the table. "There's nothing I hate more than painters. They're the most inferior race in existence. Compared to them, petty thieves and serial rapists look like Jesus. All they do is dab a little bit of paint on something with a little brush and they think they're so damn great. A little red, a little blue, and that counts as a day of work? Hah! Anybody can do it!"

It was as if she had turned into another person. It was such an abrupt transformation, it almost made you wonder if a painter had once stolen her research materials or something.

"Ah, sorry," she said, returning to her normal self upon noticing my stunned expression. "I guess I got carried away. Not that I'm going to take any of that back, but I know it's no fun listening to someone gripe about someone else. I think I'm going to go cool off."

Her words racing, she helped herself to the rest of my coffee and then made for the door as if she were beating a hasty retreat. It seemed she was regretting losing her head like that. Even if she wasn't going to take it back…

"Phew," I let out a sigh once I was alone.

Man, I had been nervous. I'm not that used to holding conversations with people in the first place, much less Akane Sonoyama of the ER3 Seven Fools. No sweat, right?

Well, aside from that blunder at the very end, we were actually able to hold a much more natural conversation than I would've imagined, so I guess I should've been happy. And maybe, sometime in the next four days, I would get to have that game of shogi with her. I'd ask her to play without her rooks, bishops, and generals.

I let out another sigh, but there was no time to snooze. Having

finished breakfast, I decided to pay another visit to Kunagisa's room, but not a second later, Maki appeared in mid-yawn. Fully dressed in outdoor gear, which she complemented with a high ponytail, she looked very much like she had come to this island on vacation.

"Poppapa pop pop ♪ Poppa poppah□" she hummed cheerfully as she strolled over and took a seat by me. "Good morning."

"…Hello."

"Tut tut… You gotta say 'good morning' when you greet someone in the morning. Ah, wait, I guess I'm not such an early bird, am I? You've been up since six, wow… As for me, I have super-ordinarily low blood pressure, so I can't be like you," she said with another big yawn.

I gave the usual nod and "yup" combo. There was no point in asking how she knew when I woke up.

I was once again nervous, this time in an entirely different way than when I was with Akane.

Maki Himena.

Of course she wasn't just here to go surfing. There was a solid reason for her being on this island.

Maki's occupation was fortune-telling. Just as Kanami was a painting genius and Akane was an academic genius, Maki was known as a genius in the world of fortune-telling.

Now that's a real talent, huh?

That aside, I felt really awkward with Maki.

We had had a bad first impression of each other.

"You're a fortune-teller? I've never met one of those before. So how does my fortune look?"

It's not like I actually cared all that much about my fortune. I just

figured that since she was a fortune-teller, it was the socially appropriate thing to say. Anyone would be thrilled to have the conversation turn to his or her field of expertise. As Churchill once said, “I want to talk about what I know, but people only ask me about what I don’t.” I didn’t want to be one of those people.

That’s just an excuse though.

In response, Maki grinned and said, “Well, give me your year, month, and date of birth; your blood type; and the name of your favorite movie actor.” I answered, wondering what possible connection my favorite actor could have to my fortune, birthday and blood type aside. In fact, I had forgotten my blood type, and I didn’t really know a lot of movie actors, for that matter, so two of my answers were bullshit.

After hearing me out with her eyes shut, Maki said, “Okay, I see. Then, take this.” She produced a slip of paper from her pocket and handed it to me. And with that, she left.

Assuming this was like a paper fortune, I opened it and took a look. My date of birth, along with the blood type and actor I had just given, were inscribed on it in a typewritten font.

“It’s gotta be some sort of trick…”

Later, I checked with Kunagisa about it, saying, “I figure it’s that worn-out magic trick where you hide slips of paper with random numbers all over yourself.”

“Mmm.” Kunagisa shook her head. “No way. That might work for playing cards, but for something like this, there’d be too many. Plus, she couldn’t have looked you up beforehand. It’s not like she could’ve guessed you would lie about your blood type and favorite actor.”

And then Kunagisa gave me the Maki Himena lecture. It seemed that although uneducated folks like myself hadn’t heard of her, Maki was actually a known name in the fortune-telling world. She didn’t do those soothing horoscopic “cold readings” like you see in magazines, but rather used her skills to advise bigwig politicians

and corporate clients, mainly, like some guru who nonchalantly stayed out of the limelight.

Maki Himena, genius fortune-teller.

“Also known as a medium,” Kunagisa said meaningfully.

Her catchphrase was: a power who knows the past, the future, human beings, the world, and all inside it.

“A power?” I asked.

“She has a superpower. ‘Extrasensory perception,’” Kunagisa said aloofly, using the English words.

“Huh?”

“ESP. Superpowers are divided into the two categories of ESP and PK. What Maki’s got is ESP. Retrocognition, precognition, and telepathy, I think it was. Retrocognition means she can see the past. Precognition means she knows the future. Telepathy means she can read your psyche.”

“Wait a sec, I don’t follow. Wind down your rpm… Tomo, she’s a fortune-teller, right?”

“Occupationally, yes. Using her special abilities. That’s all. Being able to run fast isn’t an occupation, right? But being an athlete is. Being good with your hands isn’t an occupation, right? But being a technician is. Special abilities are abilities, and fortune-telling is an act, but fortune-teller is an occupation.”

“Ah…” I nodded. “So Maki…”

“Yep. She read your thoughts in advance, including the fact that you’d ask her,” Kunagisa said with a bright smile.

“Superpower,” I muttered softly so as not to be heard by Maki, now sitting next to me in the dining room. I recalled my conversation with Kunagisa, which had been somewhat convincing, to be sure, but…

Seeing this sleepy-eyed, spacey woman, it was really hard to think of her in such a way. She was just a weird sister with low blood pressure who was feeling drowsy.

“You seem to have a problem with my being a fortune-teller,” she said, suddenly shifting her glance toward me. For some reason, she seemed to be picking on me a little ever since our first encounter. “Perhaps you’d like me to go walking around with a black hood and crystal ball. Should I speak to you in vague, cryptic terms about your impending doom? You just take everything at face value, don’t you?”

“I don’t think that’s the case.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet. I know all about it,” she replied, shaking her head. “Well, whatever. You don’t matter anyway.”

“I don’t matter?”

“Yup. You’re the Japanese representative of things that don’t matter.”

In other words, the most unimportant guy in Japan. It was a terrible thing to hear.

“But I’ll give you one piece of advice out of the kindness of my heart. Your impression of me is quite out of line. And that’s not all. The ideas you hold about the residents of this island are all out of line. And that includes Kunagisa. More important, it looks like you intentionally adjust all your beliefs when you’re talking to other people. That’s surely a very comfortable way to live, but I wouldn’t call it a wise one. It’ll end up hurting you big time,” she rattled off at me before letting out another catlike yawn.

For the last two days, I had gotten the same earful of gripes every time we met. And I couldn’t say she was all that far off the mark, either. Her remarks were so accurate, I wondered if she really was using telepathy.

I’ll be honest: I found her really creepy.

“Oh, I’m sorry for being creepy…”

Muttering those words, she walked off in the direction of the kitchen, presumably to get her breakfast.

4

So as not to let this opportunity slip through my fingers, I immediately made my way out of the dining room and back to Kunagisa's room. As I expected, she was still face-to-face with her workstation. It didn't seem right to be such a shut-in while also being a guest in another person's home, but I guess we just had different values.

Kunagisa looked back at me.

"Oooh, Iichan. Welcome back. How was it? Did you run into anyone?"

"Almost everyone. Today I've seen everyone except Teruko and Iria. Oh yeah, Yayoi, too." Though having eaten her food, I felt as if I had met her.

"Hmm, well, that's almost perfect."

"What is?"

"Your score in the Meeting Everyone on Wet Crow's Feather Island by Mid-Morning Contest."

That didn't quite flow off your tongue.

But anyway.

There were currently twelve people on the island. Artist Kanami Ibuki, Akane Sonoyama of the Seven Fools, Chef Yayoi Sashirono, Fortune-teller Maki Himena, and Techie Tomo Kunagisa. Also Shinya Sakaki and myself, the tagalongs. Then there were the original residents of the island, starting with Iria Akagami, who owned the island and the mansion, plus head maid Rei Handa and the three all-purpose maids, Akari Chiga, Hikari Chiga, and Teruko Chiga. A dozen total.

In an ordinary-sized house, things would've already gotten fairly cramped, but in this oversized palace, there was still an excess of space.

That's when I remembered.

"Hey, Kunagisa. How long were you planning to be here again?"

"Another four days. So for a week, yeah?"

"Shinya was asking me about something." I explained to her what Shinya had told me: the rumor about Iria's favorite jack-of-all-trades and master of all coming to town. Kunagisa, however, seemed uninterested, tuning out the majority of my story.

"Is that really important? It's all really vague information, so it's hard to say, but I don't think we really need to meet this person. I didn't really come here to meet any geniuses, and I'm not really interested."

"Well, yeah, but hey, I've been meaning to ask for a while, why exactly did you come here? If you're not interested in that kind of thing, what were you so interested in?" I couldn't figure why someone who hated leaving the house as much as Kunagisa did accepted an invitation like this.

She tilted her head a bit, and after a moment's pause said, "Eh, just cuz." A nonanswer. "There's no particular reason, really. Or are you the type of guy who always needs there to be one for everything?"

I shrugged. No way.

"As long as I have network access, it doesn't really matter where I am. Home is the best in the end, though," she said in spite of still being on vacation.

Well, whatever. She was just being her usual whimsical self. I didn't particularly mind, and it wasn't like I was supposed to, either. I sprawled myself out on the pure white carpet and stared up at the chandelier on the ceiling. Man, what an unrealistic scene. Then again, if you asked me what would be a realistic scene, I wouldn't know what to say.

Kunagisa looked at me sprawled on the floor. “Iichan, I don’t suppose you’re bored?”

“I’m bored with life.”

“Y’know, that’s really unattractive.”

Ow. She laid it right out for me.

“If you’re free, why not read a book? I brought a few.”

“A book, huh? Whatcha got?”

“Um, an English-Japanese dictionary, the Statute Books, and Imidas.” The last was an encyclopedia of contemporary terms.

“Ugh, bring that stuff in digital form.”

Who has fun reading that kind of stuff, anyway?

Oh, right. She does.

Half giving up and half fed up, I rolled over.

“Huh? Iichan, your watch is broken, isn’t it?”

“What?”

I took a look at my watch. Right. Come to think of it, I had meant to ask her to fix it. After running into so many people this morning, I’d forgotten all about it.

“Lemme see. I’ll fix it for you.”

“Here. Maybe the battery’s dead.”

“Hmm…” She held the watch up to the light. “Nope, something else is wrong. Did you bump it into something hard? Anyway, I think it’ll be a quick fix. But you know, wristwatches have become sort of an anachronism these days. Most people just get by with their cell phone. Wait, speaking of which, where’s yours?”

“I left it at home.”

“You should bring it. That’s what makes it a mobile phone.”

“But what if I lost it?”

“Well, I guess, but□”

“And it would be out of service here anyway. It would take a phone like yours to get any signal here.”

Kunagisa uses a phone that receives signals from relay satellites and lets her connect to any place in the world. Even on a solitary island in the middle of nowhere, her phone didn’t know the meaning of the phrase “out of service.” Of course, it didn’t come cheap. It was a terrible waste of money for an antisocialite like Kunagisa, but she wasn’t the type to give much thought to such matters.

“Well, maybe so,” she said. “It’s not like being an anachronism is a bad thing.”

She narrowed her big eyes and placed my watch next to the computer rack.

Just then there was a knock at the door. Kunagisa showed no response whatsoever, so I had no choice but to open it myself. The visitor was none other than Hikari, cleaning supplies in tow.

“Hello. Thanks so much,” I invited her in.

“Yo, Hikari, ciao~o!” Kunagisa welcomed her with a full-faced grin.

Hikari responded with a smile of her own. For some reason these two girls had hit it off and just plain got along. It’s a rare thing for someone to be able to become so friendly with Kunagisa in such a short period of time, so I couldn’t help but be a little surprised.

“What are you up to, Tomo?” the maid asked.

“I’m making some game software right now. I’m creating an application that converts text to music. I figured I’d give it to Iria as a memento of my visit.”

“What kind of game is that?” I butted in.

“Well, shall I explain? Okay, um, okay, so, Iichan, what’s the longest book you’ve ever read?”

“I quit halfway through The Tale of Genji and Don Quixote, so… Tolstoy’s War and Peace. Yup, that was long.”

“Okay. So let’s say you converted that whole book into a text document, whether by using a scanner or by typing it all by hand. Then you do a D/A conversion, like where ‘a’ is ‘C,’ ‘e’ is ‘D,’ ‘i’ is ‘E,’ and so on. If you do that, you end up with the War and Peace orchestral piece. For that much text, it would probably come out to around…an hour, maybe? Of course, in reality it’s more complicated than that. The code conversions and sessions and everything have to be in harmony. But still, it turns novels into music. Sounds fun, right?”

“Well, I don’t know about fun, but it definitely sounds interesting. What programming language are you using? VB? C?”

“Machine language.” An extremely basic-level coding language.

I didn’t think anybody used it these days. “So it’s like you can communicate with the machine like it’s some close buddy of yours.”

“Heh heh heh,” she laughed, just a little boastfully.

Seemingly even more ignorant than I about computers, Hikari wore an ambiguous, half-comprehending expression. “How amazing,” she simply marveled.

“Seriously,” I said. “But what’s actually fun about this software? I guess I don’t really get it.”

“Making it is fun.”

It was a solid reason. I couldn’t object.

Hikari listened with apparent interest, but then seemed to remember something. “Oh, right.” She turned to me. “Would it be all right if I cleaned your room later on? I stopped by…the storeroom a little earlier, but you were out.”

“Sure, no problem.”

I didn’t know what cleaning there was to be done in that room, though.

Hikari politely thanked me and resumed cleaning Kunagisa’s. When she was about done, she stopped and crouched to the floor with a sigh.

“I apologize. I’m just…a little exhausted.”

“Why not take a break?” I suggested.

“No, I’ll be fine. Rei would get mad anyway. I’ve said it before, but she’s so strict. I’ll be fine. I’m peppy. That’s my one positive trait. I’m fine. Please forgive me for causing you concern,” she said firmly, then exited the room.

I let out a sigh. “Sure seems to have it tough. Maybe it’s just my assumption, but seeing her like that, it seems as if she’s bearing an awfully big load on her own.”

“Do you feel a little like you’re watching yourself?”

“It’s not like that, but y’know, I do feel a bit of sympathy for her.”

She did come across as the long-suffering type, after all.

Rei and Akari seemed to have a distinct notion in their heads that this was just “work,” but Hikari didn’t seem to be able to mentally process it that way. It was like the concept of work hadn’t been figured into her internal circuit. Perhaps there were circumstances surrounding that.

As for the other maid, Teruko, I wasn’t sure what she was thinking, so I couldn’t comment.

“Everybody’s suffering through something, Iichan,” Kunagisa said knowingly. “Or if they aren’t, they’re at least striving in some way. Hikari, your pal Nao, Akane□everyone. If there’s anyone who’s living and not suffering or striving, it’s probably me.”

5

After having lunch, I headed for Kanami's atelier as promised. Kunagisa claimed, as usual, not to be hungry and headed to bed shortly after noon. She was a chronically sleep-deprived little techie.

"Wake me for din-din, please. I hafta see Iria and stuff," she said.

I knocked on the atelier door, waited for a response, then turned the knob. The floor was uncarpeted hardwood. In some ways it reminded me of the art room in my elementary school, except of course that this room wasn't lined with scarred-up desks and there weren't any fake-looking plaster sculptures. It wasn't as big either. The total area of the atelier was probably around half the size of the room Kunagisa was staying in.

"Welcome. Take a seat over there," Kanami said, after briefly staring at me in cold silence. Shinya must have been in his room or someplace, as Kanami was the only person there. I walked past a shelf containing paint and paint supplies and took a seat as told.

I faced Kanami and said, "Thanks for doing this."

I couldn't deny that she was a pretty woman. With blond hair and blue eyes, she was like one of those cloistered princesses you see in old films. She exuded intelligence, too. And moreover, she had artistic talent. It was like she had God's favor.

"…"

No, maybe I can't say that.

She had bad legs, and until a few years ago, she couldn't even see. I guess it would be pretty damn low of me in all my able-bodied good fortune to gripe. But on the other hand, Kanami herself didn't seem to view her condition as a handicap or disability.

“God is fair. If I had been able-bodied, it would’ve conversely been unfair to the healthy.” “Legs are just a decoration.” “Even when I gained my eyesight, my world didn’t really change. The world looked just as I’d thought. Natural selection and fate have unusually bad taste.”

All quotes from Kanami’s art books.

She sat in a round, wooden chair just like the one I was sitting in. She was in a dress, so it looked mildly uncomfortable, I noticed.

“Kanami, is that what you wear when you’re painting?”

“Are you doubting my fashion sense?”

Her face grew subtly more stern. It seemed that this was no joke. She was actually miffed. I scrambled to weasel my way out.

“No no, I didn’t mean that. I was just thinking your clothes might get dirty.”

“I don’t go and change my clothes every time I paint something. Up to now, I’ve never dirtied my clothes even once while painting. I’m not an idiot.”

“Oh, I see.”

I guess it was like being an expert calligrapher. In retrospect, getting paint on your clothes is probably a pretty amateur blunder. To Kanami, one of the top artists in the entire world, the mere suggestion was probably rude, like preaching to the Buddha.

I shrugged. “But is it really okay painting someone like me?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she snapped with the same stern expression. She seemed to be in a pretty awful mood. Or no, maybe this was her default setting.

“Er, no, it’s just that, won’t it decrease your worth as an artist?”

Like, for example, it was probably safe to say that Kunagisa had tech skills like no one else in the world. However, she only ever

used them for fun, so the number of people who actually acknowledged her as amazing and brilliant was extremely small.

“Authority is an outcome,” as Kunagisa herself put it. “Not doing and not being able to are the same thing.”

I figured it was the same with painters. If you just choose your subjects randomly and mess around all the time, it’s hard to get other people to acknowledge your worth as an artist.

But Kanami denounced my thinking.

“Didn’t I just tell you I’m not an idiot? Do you have a brain at all? I don’t go around choosing subjects. You know, if you keep your mouth shut, people won’t see how stupid you are, so why don’t you do just that?”

She sounded so fed up that my heart sank too.

“I just… I hate that kind of thinking. It makes me want to puke. ‘Oh, there were no good subjects to paint.’ ‘My model was no good.’ ‘The environment was all wrong.’ ‘That’s not the kind of subject I should be painting.’ And it’s not just with painters either. ‘Oh, this isn’t what I want to do,’ or ‘Teacher, I can’t figure out what I want to do.’ You must know people who say such obnoxiously egotistical things.”

“Yes, as a matter of fact.” Me.

“For god’s sakes,” she sighed. “I hate people who bitch about what they want and don’t want to do, shelving their own ineptitude. I want to tell them to stop living like pricks. I don’t mean they should all die, but they should be more humble. Just get on with whatever and stop whining all the time. I don’t care if it’s some boring jerk or a pile of bug guts, I’d turn it into gorgeous art.”

Despite her nice and sweet appearance, she was incredibly proud of herself. She was so uncompromising that she didn’t even forgive others who compromised.

Being compared to a pile of bug guts wasn’t my favorite thing in the world, but if she could paint that, surely she could paint me. It

seemed that attempting any further considerate remarks would be impolite, or rather, futile, so I decided to stay quiet.

I noticed that behind Kanami was a canvas. An under-angle view of the cherry blossom tree was drawn on it in pencil. The one she had been looking at this morning with Shinya.

It was so precisely drawn, it was like a monochrome photograph. With about ten million pixels. No, that's dumb. There was no need to cheapen such an intricate drawing with that kind of metaphor.

I pointed to the picture. "When did you draw that?"

"This morning. Got a problem?"

It was early morning when she was observing the tree. That was about five hours earlier. Had she completed this amazingly detailed picture in a mere five hours? It felt like such a drawing should've taken at least a week to complete. I must have shot her a skeptical look, without thinking, because she treated me to an audacious, and malicious, smile.

"Only idiots spend three or four months doing something you can finish in a week. Idiots or lazy people. And since I'm neither, I don't spend more than three hours on something that shouldn't take any longer than that."

Oww.

Being the pure embodiment of laziness, this was painful to hear. It stung. I wished Kunagisa could've heard it, too.

"Right? Even you have to agree a little, too, right?" she said in a cruel tone, demanding my concurrence. I couldn't help but feel as if she were attacking me with a direct insult. And I doubt that was just a false impression.

"Uh, no, well…yes. Er, but anyway, you're really good."

"Yeah, sure," she answered, completely uninterested in my generic praise. It was an exceedingly bland comment for me to make, in retrospect. You're really good, just that. It sounds like something a

five year old would say. Am I stupid or what?

“Uh, so, Kanami, you do detail pictures?”

“I do all kinds of pictures. You didn’t know?”

Of course. I’d put my foot in my mouth again. The woman before my eyes was Kanami Ibuki, the woman artist who rejected styles and repudiated stances. Whether it be detailed or abstract, there was no picture she couldn’t or wouldn’t paint.

She squinted just one eye at me. “Getting hung up on one style is the height of folly. I won’t say people should be indifferent to being themselves, but getting too hung up is just plain bizarre. It’s nuts. If there’s one thing in life I want to do as I please, it’s painting.”

“That might be so.” Unable to disagree or agree, I nodded halfheartedly. Having seen through my impoverished state of mind, or not, she gave a contemptuous snort.

“Hey… Have you even seen my art?”

“Well, a few times, in some of your art books. But owing to my ignorance, this is the first time I’ve seen it in person.”

“Ah… And what did you think? Not the art book stuff, but that cherry blossom one.”

To me, Kanami’s question was a bit of a surprise. I never figured that so-called geniuses cared much about other people’s opinions. For instance, starting with Akane Sonoyama of the Seven Fools, none of the people at ER3, including my fellow program participants, a despicable bunch, had any vanity or desire for glory, and nobody cared about how they looked in other people’s eyes.

I know my worth better than anyone else. I don’t need any praise from half-assed dimwits. That was their unanimous way of thinking. Probably why I wasn’t a big fan of theirs.

“Uhmm,” I said, groping for an answer, “well, it’s a very pretty picture.”

“A pretty picture, huh?” she repeated my words. “You know, there’s no need to try and flatter me. I won’t get mad.”

“No, it’s just that I don’t really have much judgment or a critical eye for this kind of thing. But I do think it’s a pretty picture.”

“Ah… Pretty, huh?” She wore an utterly disappointed expression as she stared at her canvas. She muttered, as though to herself, “Pretty. Pretty pretty pretty. That’s not the kind of compliment you give to art…”

“Huh?”

“You don’t get it? Such a shame… I really don’t want to do this. What a waste…”

She let out a heavy sigh, hunched over a bit, and picked up the canvas.

She lifted it up over her head…

….and smashed it into the hardwood floor.

The sound of splintering wood.

Of course, it wasn’t the floor that had broken.

“Hey, wh-what are you doing?”

“As you can see, I’m disposing of my screwup. Ah, why did it have to come to this?”

That decidedly should’ve been my line. She stared down at the wrecked canvas, a sorrowful look on her face, and let out another sigh.

“Geez, it looked like it would’ve been worth about twenty million one day.”

“Twenty million yen?” I ventured.

“Twenty million dollars.”

Different unit…

“Of course, we’re talking about several decades later.”

“Artists can be pretty reckless at times…”

Did she need to do that right in front of me? I couldn’t help but feel guilty that my crappy comments had invited this disaster.

“It’s not your fault. This is my responsibility. I’m not the kind of imbecile who pushes her own responsibilities onto other people.”

“But I’m just an amateur. You didn’t have to do something like that based on the opinion of an amateur.”

“It’s not art if you get to pick who looks at it,” she insisted.

So that’s how it was.

I could understand that.

Her words and her manner were filled to the brim with spite, but to be sure, this woman was an artist to the bone.

“But it was so realistic, just like a photograph…”

“That’s not a compliment either, you know. Listen, if you have a habit of complimenting people by saying ‘it’s just like blah blah blah,’ I think you’d better quit it. It’s really an insult of the highest order. If your brain absolutely needs to box everything into a style, though, I guess there’s no hope.” She turned back toward me. “I suppose I can understand why you say it was like a photograph, though. After all, photographs originally spawned from drawings.”

“Is that right?”

“Yeah. You didn’t know?” She raised an eyebrow at me.

It seemed saying, “You didn’t know?” was her habit.

“The person who invented daguerreotype photography was in fact an artist. Apparently the study of perspective is related to the

invention of the camera. At least you've heard of the camera obscura, right?"

Heard of it, yes. The so-called dark chamber. The phenomenon where if you make a hole in one spot on the wall of a pitch-black room, the outside scenery will project onto the opposite wall. It was quite an old technology that was even mentioned by Aristotle in the B.C.'s. Supposedly it was the origin of the camera.

"It was one technique among others devised to create accurate images," she continued. "The main idea behind perspective is to 'show things the way they really look.' That's how the French artist Courbet put it. He also espoused realism by saying, 'I've never seen an angel, so why would I paint one?' It goes against my philosophy, though. If you get a kid to draw something, it never has any perspective or depth, right? Everything's just displayed in the foreground. The size of objects is also chosen at whim, so for example a house and a person are the same size, or the most important thing is drawn the biggest. In other words, what they're putting on the canvas isn't what the objects look like, it's how the objects feel. If you believe that drawing pictures is a form of personal expression, then I think that's the correct way to do it. If you think about it like that, a drawing that looks just like a photograph isn't a good drawing at all, is it?"

"Okay."

As soon as she had broken out the lingo, I lost my grip on what she was talking about. And with all her chitchat she hadn't even started setting up to paint. When was she planning to get going?

"Though truth be told, photographs aren't such an accurate representation of reality, either. If you edit a photograph well, it's not hard to fool people. Maybe they're not so different from paintings, in the sense that they're both selective."

"Uh, Kanami, were you going to draw me?"

"Right now I'm memorizing." Just as I thought I was about to be called incompetent again, she spoke to me with unexpected gentleness. "Maybe you didn't know? I'm the type who has to do

her work alone. When I'm with other people my focus goes wacko."

She sounded like Leonardo da Vinci. Artists who don't look and paint at the same time weren't the kind of thing you heard about every day, but they weren't unheard-of either, so I wasn't particularly surprised.

"So when I do portraits, I just have to rely on my memory."

"You can do that?"

"To me, memory and perception are synonymous."

Now she sounded like Hannibal the Cannibal.

"Let's just stay and talk like this for the next two hours. Then I'll start painting after you leave. Ah, after I redo this cherry blossom picture, that is. I want to turn it into something at least you can comprehend. For your painting, I'll need to put down two layers of color, so it'll take a little while. I should be able to give it to you tomorrow morning."

"You'll give it to me?"

"Sure. I don't need that kind of painting. I have no interest in paintings that are finished. I'll sign it, so if you sell it you should be able to make something decent. Of course you could always destroy it if you don't like it, but that seems like a bit of a waste. It should be worth about fifty million."

What a materialistic conversation.

Sigh.

"Oh, by the way," I said, "I hear you're on bad terms with Akane."

"That's right. Or really, it's sort of a one-sided hatred on her part. I, personally, feel nothing but goodwill for Sonoyama the scholar, Sonoyama the researcher, Sonoyama of the ER3 Seven Fools, nothing but admiration…"

"Nothing but… And how do you really feel?"

She gave a little smirk. “As for ‘just plain’ Akane Sonoyama, I despise her.”

Two hours later.

After leaving Kanami’s atelier, I headed for Kunagisa’s room. She was in bed, but evidently she had awoken at some point and fixed my watch. In a prank that was pure Kunagisa, the digital display was now mirror-imaged, but at least it seemed to be working, so I stuck it on my left arm, patted the sleeping Kunagisa on the head, said thanks, and headed to Akane’s room.

“Play me without your rooks, bishops, and generals,” I requested.

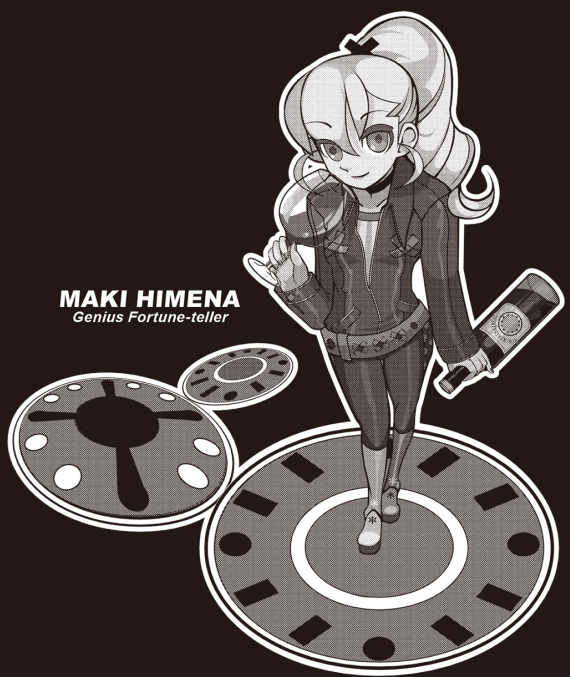
“I’ll allow a bigger handicap,” she said with a delighted smile and proceeded to line her side of the shogi board with chess pieces. “An East-West mélange.”

“It feels more like a mixed martial arts match…”

Handicap notwithstanding, I was thoroughly trounced.

Seven times in a row.

THIRD DAY (2)
Set and Arithmetic



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If we turn a blind eye to the fact that your opinion is entirely wrong, you're quite right.

1

I roused the slumbering Kunagisa awake, forced her to wash her face, and tied her blue hair up in a ponytail for her. Then with her still half-asleep, and me half-carrying her, we headed to the dining hall, where everyone else from the mansion was already gathered.

Round table, two empty seats.

I helped Kunagisa to her seat and then sat down next to her. As I settled in my chair, I took a quick look around the table at each person.

"…"

Out of the twelve people present, the most eye-catching person□and I'm not sure whether or not this goes without saying□was none other than the mistress of the house, Iria Akagami. The concept of beauty is wholly subjective, varying from one person to the next, so to say Iria was beautiful would probably be pointless. If I say she was beautiful, that was simply something I personally felt and nothing more. Besides, Akari the maid was way more up my alley, as long as we're talking about personal preferences. No, I guess

that's irrelevant.

Seriously.

To give something more objective, Iria Akagami was a classy woman. She wore her pretty black hair in a roll, coupled with an expensive-looking dress. She was actually somewhat mismatched, but her excessive classiness more than made up for it. She seemed to be around the same age as me, still in her twenties, but man, upbringing and lineage really do have their effects on people. Of course, there's always other factors as well, but those things are important for sure. That's always been the case.

Iria Akagami.

The black sheep granddaughter of the Akagami Foundation.

"Well then, now that Kunagisa is here, shall we commence with the best part of the day?" She put her hands together like a little kid and said, "Thanks for the meal." It seemed she was fairly jejune. Perhaps it was more that she wasn't a worldly person, but same difference.

Incidentally, this island, where people were largely free to do as they wished, had a single rule: "We all eat dinner together." It was a simple rule that shouldn't have been hard for anyone to follow, but indeed, quite a few men and women of talent had failed to do so and ended up leaving the island. There are a lot of similarities between a genius and a person with no common sense or decency.

Iria sat with two maids on either side of her: Teruko and Rei to the left, Akari and Hikari to the right. There was no way to distinguish between Akari and Hikari, so I couldn't tell which one was which. Theoretically one would've been able to tell them apart by their facial expressions and gestures and such, but for the nonobservant type like myself, it was a challenge. Kunagisa seemed to be able to distinguish between the two (which was no mystery, since it was Tomo Kunagisa, after all), but from what I'd heard, their mistress Iria couldn't. But the pair didn't seem to mind.

"Now then, everybody raise your glasses… Cheers!" she said in a

singsong voice, her glass raised high in the air. Everyone else, including myself, did likewise. But it bore mentioning that my glass and Kunagisa's were filled not with wine, but with juice.

We were underage.

A number of dishes were set beautifully around the table. They were the proud masterpieces of genius chef Yayoi Sashirono. I'll start with the dish closest to me and go in that order:

Crowned lamb roast, cappuccino-based sweet potato soup, foie gras terrine with truffle gnocchi, steamed blue mussels, eel simmered in green sauce à la berge, pickled herring, whale meat sashimi. Sauce-covered ravioli, ostrich meat carpaccio. Fruit salad, potato salad with egg, and, finally, oil-sautéed mushrooms.

"…"

Yup, I couldn't make heads or tails of it.

Probably because Yayoi had cooked to cater to the tastes of a dozen people without rhyme or reason, even after hearing the names, I had no idea. But that was neither here nor there. It's not like a name has that profound of an influence on the thing itself.

I think.

After all this, there was said to be dessert as well. If you thought about it, it was really a copious quantity of food. And with Yayoi being the culinary maestro she was, the food was so delicious that I all but entirely neglected to watch my weight. Granted, Yayoi had apparently factored that into her cooking.

"After factoring in the nutritional value, it's still this amazing. She really is a genius," I muttered to myself, and not for the first time.

Speaking of which, I had spoken to Yayoi a bit during lunch. When I had gone to the dining hall, she happened to be the only other person around, so I used the opportunity to inquire about the popular rumor about her.

In other words, what was this secret power that allowed her to

make any dish better than any other chef?

That was the question.

Upon hearing it, Yayoi gave a little amused laugh.

“I’m afraid reality doesn’t quite live up to the legends. Unlike Himena, I don’t have any sort of wild superpower. Basically, it’s just effort and discipline.”

“Really?”

“Well, I suppose I can imagine what might have started such a rumor. My senses of taste and smell are a bit, well, a lot stronger than the average person’s.” She flicked out her tongue. “To give an anecdotal example, ah, okay, like Helen Keller. She was blind, but they say she could distinguish between people just by their smell. I’m a little bit like that. My sense of smell isn’t quite that amazing, but, for example…”

She took my arm and, without warning, licked the back of my hand. I’d never dreamt of this development and nearly let out a yelp but somehow managed to suppress it.

With her tongue still out, she gave an Einsteinish grin. “You’ve got type AB blood, don’t you?” she said. “Negative, right?”

It occurred to me that she was right. When I applied for my passport, a public health doctor told me, “You have an extremely rare blood type.” So Yayoi was right for sure, but…

“You can really tell all that just by licking my skin?”

“Well, by licking your sweat, to be specific. My tongue can distinguish between approximately twenty thousand flavors over twenty levels of intensity. My sense of smell is probably around half that good, I suppose.” She tilted her head thoughtfully. It was a cute mannerism. “I’m not smart like Sonoyama; I’m terrible at art, unlike Ibuki; I’m not particularly skilled with machines like Kunagisa; I certainly don’t have psychic abilities like Himena; and there’s not much else I’m any good at, but I’ve had just this one strength since I was a kid. I figured becoming a chef was the only way to take

advantage of it.”

Perfect taste, it was apparently called.

It’s like the taste version of perfect pitch, except perfect taste isn’t something you can acquire with training. In other words, Yayoi Sashirono was, to just come out and say it, one of the lucky few chosen by God. Among the highly skilled, there are two types of people: those who are chosen, and those who choose themselves—those who have value, and those who create value. Of course, Yayoi had discipline and effort, but she was evidently a genius of the former type.

So the path of a chef was not really something she had chosen. She had been born with this gift, and for that reason had gone on to study gastronomy, to travel to the West, and to polish her inborn talents even further.

Flavor ultimately stems from an individual’s ability to discern tastes. How well you can make a flavor your own and put it to use must be a major part of your skill as a chef. It made sense, then, that Yayoi excelled at it.

Well, that’s the chopped logic of it, but it doesn’t mean much practically. In a nutshell, Yayoi’s cooking was damn tasty.

If you thought of the round table as a clock with Iria sitting at twelve o’clock, then Yayoi Sashirono was at three o’clock next to Akari or Hikari.

At four o’clock was Shinya Sakaki. As you would expect from the man who had long been employed as Kanami’s caretaker, he looked not the least bit intimidated, and was actually rather stately looking.

Next to him sat Kanami Ibuki at the five o’clock position. Behind her was her wheelchair, which she must have used to come to the dining room. She didn’t seem to be in a particularly bad mood, but she didn’t look very cheerful either.

At six o’clock was Tomo Kunagisa. This meant she was sitting

directly across from the mistress of the house, Iria Akagami. That was more than enough to make me nervous, but my feeling nervous didn't matter; to Kunagisa, the word nervous didn't even exist in the Japanese language.

Then in lucky seat number seven sat myself.

To my left at eight o'clock sat Akane Sonoyama of the Seven Fools. She was completely immersed in devouring Yayoi's cuisine. She had much more of an appetite than you might expect. Of course, she was a human being before she was a scholar—whether or not she would admit it herself—and you can't live if you don't eat, but even disregarding that, she was a serious eater. Just watching her chow down was salubrious. It seemed to me that Yayoi couldn't have wished for more.

Next to Akane at nine o'clock sat the genius fortune-teller, the one with ESP superpowers, Maki Himena. At some point she had apparently changed clothes and was adorned in a different fashion than in the morning. She wore a halter-neck striped shirt with a pale, pink cardigan and sheep-printed cropped pants. Her hair was up in twin ponytails. Possibly because she noticed me looking at her, she looked back at me with an unpleasant sneer and sank her teeth into some roast lamb. It was an expression that said, "I know everything, but I'm not saying anything," and it made me wholly uncomfortable.

It never ends.

At ten o'clock, putatively bearing the same genes as Akari and Hikari, sat Teruko with her black-rimmed glasses. She was completely silent and mostly expressionless and depositing the food in her mouth as though she were getting rid of it. You had to wonder if her sense of taste was entirely absent for her to be able to eat these dishes without any sort of reaction.

At eleven o'clock was Rei Handa, the head maid and Iria's right hand. In contrast to the overall juvenile appearance of the three sisters, of whom she was the direct superior, Rei was the very picture of a grown-up, brisk-mannered career woman. I hadn't heard her talk much, but she seemed to be as strict as she looked,

and I had heard the corroborating sob stories of Hikari on a few occasions.

So there you have it.

“A neat dozen.”

Lucky number?

With such a lineup?

Nonsense. What did it even mean? I obviously didn’t belong here. I couldn’t be more out of place. Then again, in my nineteen years, there had never been a place where I did belong. Not Kobe, not Houston, not Kyoto, certainly not this island.

In this wide world, there’s only one me.

Fine.

I like solitude.

I’m not bluffing.

Or even if I am.

“Oh by the way, if I can change the subject…” Iria said, bringing the conversation that had been unfolding to an immediate halt. The power to direct the table talk lay in Iria’s hands alone. It was the selfish privilege befitting an upper-crust girl.

She continued, raising her voice, “It seems there are already rumors floating around, so I’ll go ahead and make the announcement. This is about the next guest. The latest genius to grace this house.”

All eyes were on Iria. Well, all except for Kunagisa, who continued to gobble down whale meat. To deliberately try and capture her attention was quite a difficult task.

“I’d like to emphasize that our new guest is the possessor of such extraordinary, glorious talent that it even bears comparison to you all. I’d like very much to welcome this person, so please cooperate,

all of you.”

We reacted in our own ways. The part about bearing comparison seemed to have an effect. With everyone checking each other, only the very ordinary Shinya dared speak up.

“Question. Just who is this? I don’t really know a whole lot just from the rumors I’ve heard, but it seems this person is a real jack-of-all-trades.”

“You could say that. We’ve only met once before…but yes, once was enough. This person is my hero.” She gazed up with evident longing. “A truly heroic being, to me. Like a master detective in a mystery novel or a monster in a kaiju movie.”

Kaiju?

I could feel my eyebrows rise of their own accord. Iria had just dropped a reference to monster movies, but was that really an accurate description? That wasn’t the kind of vocabulary you typically used to describe a human being, and when you did, it definitely didn’t sound like a compliment.

“Well, you seem to think the world of this person. My expectations are up,” Shinya said with a boisterous chuckle. “So, a versatile genius… Does that include painting?”

“I’ve never seen it, but I wouldn’t be surprised. I imagine something as simple as painting a picture shouldn’t be a challenge.”

As you’d expect, this seemed to have wounded Kanami’s pride. She looked a little bit□by which I mean ridiculously□miffed. “Might we possibly be graced with the name of this superior specimen, Iria?” she asked in a prickly tone.

I had thought this in the morning as well, but Kanami really was proud. That’s not necessarily a bad thing, but it’s not strictly a good thing, either. Far be it for me to cast aspersions about the way Kanami chose to live, but to say the least, I knew I could never live like that.

Iria, whose expression suggested that she didn’t understand why

Kanami was so mad (and in reality that probably was the case), answered plainly.

“Aikawa.”

An anodyne reply. At that point, Kanami seemed like the stupid one.

“Owing to an extremely busy schedule, Aikawa will only be staying here for three days, but everyone, please be friendly. Aikawa is a big deal to me. You could even call it love.”

Iria’s cheeks turned bright red. These childish antics further defused the tension. She innately had that sort of air about her where she could make any demand, however bossy, and be forgiven for it.

Probably her lineage to blame again.

“Even so, Aikawa, huh?”

I’d never heard the name, ignorant as I was. I looked over at Kunagisa to see her reaction, but if she did know, she’d decided to go on eating. The girl was always this way about things that didn’t interest her. More incorrigible than a child and harder to handle than an animal. Well, then again, at least she was staying seated.

“Ah, I’m so looking forward to it,” Iria said in a daze. “To think Aikawa is visiting this island again. I’m glad I didn’t give up and kept trying. It’s like a dream. Oh no, what if it really is a dream□”

Judging from her state, she must have been pretty head over heels for this Aikawa guy. It was like she was talking about the man she had been in love with for years and years.

As though to speak his name were an act of worship.

“Ah, by the by, Tomo,” she said, turning the conversation toward Kunagisa. “You were going to leave before then, isn’t that right?”

“Hmm? Oh, yup yup,” the girl responded, not bothering to stop with the chopsticks in her hands. Expecting good table manners from Kunagisa was a lost cause given that she was holding one

chopstick in each hand. “Yup, four more days.”

“That’s really too bad. It’s such a great opportunity. I’d really like you to meet Aikawa. There’s really no way?”

“Afraid not. I live in a domain where once you’ve planned something you can’t change it. They even call me the Living Timetable. Iichan, too, of course.”

Don’t drag me into this, I thought. Coming to this island was never part of my schedule in the first place.

Iria nodded with a truly disappointed look on her face. Then, looking at Kunagisa solicitously, the mistress of the mansion asked, “Is that so? Could it be that you’re not having a good time here? It doesn’t seem like you’ve left your room much.”

“I live in a domain where people don’t leave their rooms much. But no, I’m having fun. Lots of fun. I can have fun anywhere, anytime, all the way.”

“…”

Her words made me stiffen a bit. There was no exaggeration in what she said. For someone who’s completely immersed in her own world, there’s never a time that isn’t fun. And not being familiar with “other” emotions? How tragic it is to be having fun anywhere, anytime?

I already knew this about her.

“Ah, I see.” Iria shrugged. “But Tomo, meeting Aikawa would be meaningful for you, too. You’re bound to find some inspiration.”

Kanami broke into the conversation as if she’d been waiting for the perfect timing. “Being influenced by another person is proof of one’s mediocrity. Of one’s incompetence. How ridiculous. I don’t know what kind of person this Aikawa is, but I sincerely doubt there’d be any point.”

“Now now, is that a fact?” Playing devil’s advocate with Kanami was the obvious choice, Akane Sonoyama. “I’ve spent more than

five years surrounded by the finest minds in the world, and I know for a fact that without the experience, I wouldn't be where I am today. You can better yourself just by spending time with brilliant people."

"The ER3? How stupid. That's nothing but stupid. Why would anyone ever want to bind themselves to such an organization?"

"I don't consider myself bound. We behave quite freely and help hone one another's skills."

"'Freely?' Don't just throw that word around. An organization with no restrictions isn't an organization at all. In the end, even you are no more than a member of a hierarchy, isn't that right? What a crock. I've been here on this island with you for a while now, but I certainly don't feel as if I've become any more refined. If anything, my worth is decreasing."

They glared at each other. To act this way in front of a whole group of people, they really were immature. I was a bit appalled.

The maids fretted and made to mediate, but Iria had a look of pure delight on her face, so they refrained from stepping in. This kind of situation wasn't really my cup of tea. Meanwhile, Yayoi looked fairly indifferent as well, Maki looked entirely uninterested, and Shinya seemed to be writing the whole dispute off as an everyday occurrence. Wow, so many people, and nobody bothering to intercede…

Actually, there was someone.

One more person.

"In the end, human beings are a species that lives in groups, Ibuki. People such as yourself who purport to rely on nothing but lean heavily on a sense of entitlement all ought to rethink their lifestyle, if you ask me."

"Doesn't that simply mean, in the end, that you can't function without being surrounded by other people? Humans aren't migratory fish, you know. And I don't feel entitled. I'm just not self-

deprecating. I live honestly and assess things as they really are."

"Hmm, I wonder."

"Hmm, I wonder? Ah, that again. You think you look clever by taking an ambiguous stance without ever clearly stating your opinion. Yeah, have it your way. How so very clever. Hmm, I wonder, she says!"

"This is just a little hard to listen to."

A voice.

It was Kunagisa.

She pouted her lips out like a sulky kid and looked at Kanami.

"It's a little grating on my ears, Kanami, Akane."

All at once everyone looked aghast.

Nobody had expected Kunagisa, of all people, to say such a thing.

I had had quite a few experiences with her in the past, so it wasn't beyond imaginable. She, Tomo Kunagisa, hated watching people fight quite a bit. Considering her usual happy-go-lucky attitude, it might have been a little unexpected, but it did make some sense. She was a fun-loving girl, which meant she didn't like situations that weren't fun. The logic was as simple as that.

"I'm sorry. I went too far."

Somewhat surprisingly, it was Kanami who apologized first. In turn, Akane, as a prominent women of respectable status, couldn't help but acknowledge it.

"I was wrong, too," she said, awkwardly avoiding eye contact.

They both hung their heads. Though the atmosphere was still

distinctly awkward, at least the fiasco seemed to be over…

Until Maki ruined it completely.

“This is gonna get worse before it gets better…”

With an audacious grin, she muttered those words in an icy voice that carried. Just what was this fortune-teller trying to butt in with, now that things had finally settled down? Meanwhile, Iria’s eyes were twinkling with excitement.

“Is that a prophecy?” she asked. “What do you mean it’s going to ‘get worse before it gets better’? This is so fascinating. Will you tell us?”

“I won’t. I’m not saying anything. Yeah…” Saying this, Maki Himena cast a sideways glance in Kunagisa’s direction. “I’m not quite so arrogant as to try to influence the world.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I protested without thinking. As for Kunagisa, she had already turned her full attention back to nutritional intake. It was as if she’d merely found the exchange too noisy. “Maki, what do you mean by that?” I demanded.

“There’s no meaning. Just like there’s no meaning in your actions. You know, you’re… Wow, so you’re the kind of guy who’ll get angry for the sake of a complete stranger. That’s not very good. It’s not bad, per se, but it’s not good.”

“Oh my, and why is that?” Iria said, stepping into our little exchange. Or rather, maybe I was the one on the sideline. “I think it’s wonderful to be able to get angry on behalf of a stranger. That’s not so common in the world nowadays.”

“You see, people who marshal their emotions for the sake of others are the same ones who blame things on others when something goes wrong,” Maki explained, then told me, “I truly despise people like you.”

It had to be the first time in quite a while that someone had spoken that harshly right to my face. Slowly, she brought her gaze to meet my eyes.

“You just let yourself get carried along by other people. You’re the type of person who ignores traffic lights just because everyone else is doing it. You’re an abominably halfhearted human being. They say ‘harmonize without agreeing,’ but in your case, young man, it’s like you’re agreeing without harmonizing. I won’t say that’s bad. I won’t say anything as to that. Having agency doesn’t necessarily lead to individual worth. A train that runs along a track is better than a train that doesn’t. So I won’t say anything as to that. But I hate people like you. I despise them. People like you always blame things on others and never take responsibility.”

Just carried along with the flow.

To be sure, that is how I lived.

However.

“What business…”

I hated it.

Having met Kunagisa, I was thoroughly repulsed by it.

“What business does Maki Himena have to be telling me that?”

“Oh, are you angry? Gee, your boiling point’s a lot lower than I expected. Are you the type who has mood swings all the time?”

“For□”

For goodness’ sake.

For Christ’s sake.

For fucking Christ’s sake□

For God’s sake, you□

“Forget it, Iichan.” Tug, Kunagisa yanked on my sleeve. “It’s not worth getting angry about.”

…

Tomo Kunagisa.

“…Understood.”

I felt a chill go through my body. The power drained from it. I didn’t feel so much deflated as exhausted. I’d nearly risen but slumped back in my chair.

“Sorry. I was just kidding, okay?” Maki said to Kunagisa with a terribly sweet smile.

And so dinner that day was a bit of a disaster. Of course, the two days prior hadn’t exactly gone off without a hitch either, but something about this “jack-of-all-trades” had wrought havoc. This Aikawa’s coming visit to the island was becoming something to dread. Granted, I wouldn’t be there when it happened, so I didn’t really have much to do with it.

Nevertheless, I had no idea why Maki was digging into me so much. Certainly I hadn’t made a great first impression on her, but that couldn’t have been the only cause. It was obvious that she disliked me, but that wasn’t reason enough to be harping on me so aggressively.

The opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. If she just didn’t like me, she wouldn’t go so far out of her way to pick on me. Why, out of this entire group of brilliant people, would Maki Himena specifically target a boring, ordinary person like me? We didn’t have anything to do with each other.

It was strange.

Brooding over the matter, I didn’t reflect for a moment on Maki’s prophecy that things would get worse before they got better. If I had given it some thought, it’s not likely that anything would’ve gone differently, but looking back, I can’t help but regret that a little.

I guess it couldn’t be helped.

After all, the only person on that island who could regret things before they happened was Maki.

2

It was already past ten o'clock when I borrowed Kunagisa's bath to freshen up. She sat in front of her PCs in the revolving chair, but all three terminals were turned off. She just wanted to spin. She must have a strong stomach.

"You take a bath, too."

"No."

"I don't care about tonight, but take one tomorrow."

"No."

"Tomorrow I'll strip you down, tie your hands and feet, and throw you in. If you don't want that, you'd better do it yourself."

"Awww, what a drag." She half-rose out of her chair to stretch. "I envy fish. They don't ever have to take baths. Hmm, but I wonder if they get cold in the winter. Oh oh oh, by the way, have you heard this before, Iichan? So, like, let's say you're keeping a fish in a fish tank. And say you gradually raise the temperature of the tank. Like you raise it so gradually that the fish doesn't even notice. Eventually the water gets so hot that it's boiling, but the fish's body has gotten used to the gradual change, so it can go on swimming without even noticing how hot the water is. It sounds like a lie, but it's for real. Now, Iichan, what lesson can we gather from this?"

"That global warming isn't a problem."

"Ding ding ding!" She looked utterly amused. What a peppy chick, I thought, then without warning, she completely collapsed. Face-first, belly-down, without breaking her fall.

I flinched.

“Owww. That hurt.”

No doubt. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I’m hungry…”

“You just ate a freaking feast.”

“That doesn’t matter. I missed breakfast and lunch, so I probably haven’t eaten enough. I slept all afternoon, so I don’t have to sleep again until tomorrow, but I guess humans really have to save up on sleep and food.”

“Human bodies aren’t made for that kind of treatment.”

“I guess I’m not human then. Let’s get something to eat, Iichan. Will you tie my hair up first?”

“I think Yayoi’s probably already back in her room. She gets up early, so don’t you think she’s already sleeping?” We couldn’t just go wake her up so she could make a midnight meal. We had to remember that she was a guest, too.

“Hikari is probably awake though. Hikari’s cooking is delicious, too, in a Hikari kinda way. If Hikari’s asleep, too, Iichan, you can make me something.”

“Why me?”

“Well, cuz you look so a-meow-zing from behind when you’re cooking. Eheheh,” she laughed naughtily, still face-down.

“Okay okay okay. Fine fine. Understood. First I’ll tie that hair up, so get over here.”

“Oh me oh my.”

I tied her hair in a loose ponytail. Then we left her room, heading for the living room.

“Ah, by the way, sorry about earlier,” I said.

“About what? Ah, about the thing with Maki. Yeah, it’s okay. I’ll forgive you. But really, compared to the old days, you’ve gotten soft. I didn’t think you’d let her off with just a single syllable like that. I wonder if living in Houston repressed you or something.”

“Yeah, well, living in a desert like that for five years, your beliefs start to change. I’m not sure if it matters that it was a desert, though.”

“You should tell me about it sometime. What happened over there and stuff.”

“You’ve changed a lot, too. Not so much on the outside, but on the inside.”

“There’s nothing in this world that doesn’t change. It’s panta rhei.”

“Handa, Rei?”

“The cycling of all things… Iichan, you’re supposed to be smart, so why don’t you know anything?”

“I just have a bad memory. All I want is an average one, really.”

Just enough of one so that I wouldn’t forget the fun times.

Just enough of one so that I could realize the world is full of good things, too.

“Ah, Akari spotted,” Kunagisa remarked and charged down the hallway. I looked to see that, indeed, Akari was there. Or really, at this distance there was no way I could tell whether it was Akari or Hikari. It was also possible that it was Teruko with her glasses removed. But if Kunagisa said it was Akari, it was most likely her.

By the time I reached them, Kunagisa and Akari had already exchanged a few words. Kunagisa returned to my side and Akari continued down the hall in the opposite direction. I wondered about her. She must have had work left to do, even at this hour. If that was the case, she really was going above and beyond.

“What did you talk about?”

“She says Hikari’s in the living room.”

“Oh yeah? That’s convenient.”

Of course, not everything in the world goes so smoothly.

When we arrived in the living room, not only Hikari, but also Shinya and my arch-nemesis Maki Himena were there. The three of them sat on a horseshoe-shaped sofa and were engaged in lighthearted discussion.

On the table were some glasses and alcohol, plus some cheese on a big plate prepared as a snack. “Ah, Tomo,” Hikari promptly noticed our presence and called out with a raised hand. Having been noticed, there was nothing we could do. We walked over and joined them on the sofa.

Awkwardly, Kunagisa quickly snapped up the seat next to Hikari, forcing me to sit next to Maki. All the same, I couldn’t bear the thought of turning tail and running now. It was dishonorable to flee in the face of the enemy. Maki, seeming to see right through me, greeted me with a wicked expression.

“Welcome to my club,” she jested. “Sorry about before. I guess I hit a touchy subject. Really, I’m sorry. Anybody would get mad about such a sensitive subject,” she apologized insincerely.

“It wasn’t a particularly sensitive subject.”

“Oh, it was. It was so pitifiul.”

She sneered at me. Might she have been drunk? No, she was like this all the time. In fact, she was probably more pleasant when drunk. She slugged down her wine in one gulp, then thrust her glass at me.

“Now you drink, too, boy. Alcohol is good, you know. You forget all the bad things.”

“There’s nothing so bad I want to forget.”

“And there’s nothing so good you want to remember,” she giggled.

“I don’t think your poor memory is to blame for not having any happy memories. There are few happy things in your life, and few sad things. There’s not much of anything at all. It’s all empty. It’s an emptiness scarier than darkness. Ahahaha. Isn’t life fun?”

Retrocognition, telepathy.

It seemed the advertisements about her weren’t just baloney. She was a damn clairvoyant.

“Give me a break, Maki. This is just bullying.”

“Yup, I’m bullying you. Now drink up.”

“I don’t do alcohol. I’m underage.”

“How by-the-book of you. Oh dear, you’re being so cold. Oh, Iichan, you’re so cool! Is that what you want to hear? That’s weird. I should call you the Man Who’s Cold Even in the Summer.”

She put her glass back in front of her with a bored expression on her face.

Apparently quite starving, Kunagisa scarfed down the cheese appetizer. She ate with two hands, displaying terrible manners. Of course, knowing that it would be useless, I didn’t feel like scolding her.

“It’s Supreme, Valencay, and Maroilles, cheeses of the forest,” Hikari kindly explained. Apparently they were all good cheeses to have with wine. Trying a single piece, I found that it was indeed delicious, but probably only Kunagisa would be able to stand a whole lot of it without even so much as some water.

“How was Kanami?” Shinya asked me after a while, cheese in hand. He seemed fairly interested. “Did the modeling go well?”

“Yes, I suppose. There were no problems, anyway.”

“She’s got a pretty foul personality, eh?” He spoke without euphemism, about his own boss, no less.

“Oh no, she doesn’t…”

“Is that so? Well, at least I’ve never met a woman with a worse personality than that.”

I had.

She was sitting right next to me, drinking up.

“No, she was fine, really… Oh, but she did smash one of her pictures all of a sudden, and that was surprising.”

Shinya smirked. “Oh, that… Yeah, yeah. When I got back to the atelier, she was all, ‘Shinya, dispose of this garbage.’ I was like, ‘Who are you, Picasso?’ Sorry about that. That’s just her thing. Don’t pay any attention to it. That woman’s seen quite a bit of success without exerting much effort, so she’s very obstinate. She can’t live without acting like a big shot.”

“Her ‘thing’?”

“Yeah, you know. If she acts like that, she looks like a world-class artist, don’t you think? Didn’t she say all sorts of artisty things to you? Sort of snooty things? That’s how she is, you see.”

“Well, but, that’s just her true nature, right? I mean…I thought it was.”

“Oh, of course. It’s unquestionably her true nature. But she doesn’t actually have to say that kind of stuff, now, does she? If she were a real artist, she wouldn’t talk like that. Kanami is a genius, to be sure, but she’s miles away from being an artist. She’s just trying to cut a figure. At least, that’s what I think. I’d appreciate it if she would get to the next stage, but you know how it is.” He looked a little sad. “Seriously,” he continued, taking a sip of wine. A wine glass suited him so well, I envied him a little for it, unrelatedly. “That’s the reason I asked you to be her model, too. She doesn’t do many portraits, you see.”

“Oh yeah? But she was saying she doesn’t choose her subjects.”

“Well, she doesn’t, but… It’s a taste issue. She hates people. No

matter how she draws them, they complain, you see. Plus, you know, because she used to be blind, and her legs are still bad, and above all else because she has that kind of personality, she doesn't get along well with anyone."

"That's how geniuses are."

The only genius I'd ever heard of who was at all good at human relationships was Gauss. Apparently Michelangelo, for instance, was widely disliked. Ah, but in his case, people didn't like him because he was a misanthrope.

"You don't have to be a genius to be socially awkward," Maki interjected with a phony innocent expression.

Yup, she was right.

"She has a lot of pride about having reached where she is on her own," Shinya said. "So it's no wonder she doesn't get along with Sonoyama."

Indeed, Akane, who had honed her talents in a group atmosphere at the ER3 System, and Kanami, who was a raging individualist, were practically polar opposites. It was only natural that they never hit it off.

"I was the one who taught art to Kanami," Shinya told us. "Her eyes got better, and…you have to understand, back then she had nothing. No family, no special knowledge to speak of. So I gave her a brush. I was only trying to comfort her, but just a month later, she had surpassed me."

"So you paint, too?" I hadn't known that.

Shinya shrugged his right shoulder, a little embarrassed. "After Kanami surpassed me, I quit. When Verrocchio realized da Vinci had surpassed him, he broke his own paintbrush. I, too, grew to understand his feelings in that moment. With this person of unbelievable talent right next to me all the time, there's no need for me to paint pictures."

That morning, Shinya had told me we were alike. I didn't know

what he meant until now.

Shinya Sakaki relative to Kanami Ibuki.

It was just like me relative to Tomo Kunagisa.

Though he spoke badly of her, it was clear to me now that Shinya had unconditional affection for Kanami.

“So you’re the kind of guy who does things for other people, too, Shinya?” Maki said, as if reading my mind (what a simile). “Of course in your case, there’s a charm to it, unlike with some people.”

“And why’s that?” I asked.

“He doesn’t go around blaming others.”

She was trying to bring me down blow by blow.

“U-Uhm…” Hikari broke in with a worried look. “Would you like something to drink?”

“Some kind of soda would be good.”

“Certainly, right away.” Hikari pulled a small bottle of ginger ale out of the living room fridge and quickly returned. With a bright smile, she placed it beside me. “Please enjoy.”

“…”

She really was quite considerate. I thought it would be rude to keep fighting like this in front of her, so I forced my wound-up nerves to relax.

Gah, there I go blaming things on others.

Damn…

Maki had me in the palm of her hand.

“Hikari, I want some, too,” Kunagisa said.

“Certainly!” Hikari went over to Kunagisa with the ginger ale.

Seeing this, Maki said, “Come to think of it, you’re underage as well, isn’t that right, Kunagisa? But it’s okay, isn’t it? How about it? Just one drink.”

“Please don’t encourage her.”

“My my, playing guardian, are we?” Maki sneered. “Ah, how wonderful it must be to be young.”

“But you’re still young too.”

“No, I’m already twenty-nine.” She spoke as if it were no big deal, but I was a little surprised. She always dressed so youthfully, I figured she had to be about the same age as Iria.

“Wow. So that means you’re the same age as Kanami,” Shinya noted. “Then Maki, you are still young. You know, I’m already thirty-two years old. Once you pass thirty, you really start to feel your age. You get winded easily and such.”

“Hikari, how old are you?” I took the chance to ask.

“I’m twenty-seven.”

“So then, Akari is twenty-seven, too?”

“Well, we’re triplets, after all.”

Twenty-seven… I repeated the number a few times in my head. Twenty-seven years old. Akari and Hikari, both twenty-seven… Maybe this is rude of me, but they really didn’t look twenty-seven. I almost wondered if there was some sort of age-stopping mystery air flowing through the island.

“…”

Nah, not likely.

This wasn’t Neverland.

“Akane is thirty, right? And I think Yayoi is about thirty as well. Boy, when you sit down and think about it, everyone sure is young.

Iria must really like young, female geniuses."

"That'd be a pretty smug tendency…"

Kunagisa nodded in agreement as she crammed her face with cheese. Apparently having picked up a spicy piece, she immediately went for the ginger ale and chugged it, but it looked as if it went down the wrong pipe, and she released a barrage of coughs. What the hell was she doing?

Shinya let out a sigh. "I thought if I brought Kanami here to live in seclusion with other people, she might change a little. Kind of like when you send a truant kid off to camp. But this strategy seems to have been off the mark. It was kind of like a last resort…At this point, she'll probably be living like that for the rest of her life."

Misunderstood by everyone.

Not expecting anyone to understand.

Not relying on anyone but herself.

Eating away at herself all the while.

"Well, that's one way to live."

"Look who's talking."

I don't think I even have to mention whose line that last one was.

"Uh, speaking of which, Maki, why are you here on the island?" asked Shinya. "I've been wondering for a while. It's not just a vacation, is it?"

"It is. This place is a sweet deal. You get to live for free, and you even get money for it. It's Xanadu. If I use the Net, I can even still do fortune-telling. It's a world of convenience. Nonstop good times."

What a crappy excuse for an adult.

Pretty damn crappy, at that.

“I don’t recall hearing your story,” Maki gainsaid my silence. “Why are you on this island, then? And please don’t tell me something like you came here just because Kunagisa said she was coming.”

Oh, this lady, acting like she didn’t know…

Seriously, why was she picking on me like that? Maybe she was really just making fun of me with no objective or reason whatsoever.

It wasn’t unthinkable.

“Wrong,” she said, then looked over at Kunagisa. “Fine, assuming guys like you don’t matter anyway, why are you here, Kunagisa?”

“Just a whim, just a whim. I don’t go making reasons for every little thing I do.”

“I wonder.” Maki gave a suspicious grin. I didn’t know what the deal with her personality was, but she seemed to be getting along with everyone besides me rather well, including Kunagisa.

“She’s clever, unlike you.”

…

“Ah, getting sick of this? Oh, you’ve given up? Heheh, but I won’t stop. I’m gonna keep toying with you until I’m bored of it.”

She wore an absolutely sadistic smile. I felt like captured game.

“Telepathy, eh? Amazing as usual, Himena, but lay off him,” Shinya cut in like he had no choice. “You’ve chased a whole lot of brilliant people off this island doing that. He’ll be leaving soon enough as it is, so there’s no need to send him home any faster, right?”

“Everyone I try to have fun with hates me. It’s discrimination against people with superpowers, I tell you.”

Superpower…

They talked about it like it was an everyday thing, but did such a

thing really exist? The ER3 System, which touted itself as being "comprehensive," naturally conducted research on parapsychology, which is to say superpowers. Psychokinesis, ESP, DOP, levitation, and teleportation. I had seen any number of papers on the inexplicable, unobservable subject in my time in the ER3 program and even met a person who claimed to be the real deal (but turned out to be a phony).

But all I had concluded was that no matter how you thought about it, that stuff was a bunch of bull. None of those papers really explained anything, despite how hard they tried to arbitrarily cram facts into conclusions.

It was what they called "dry love." These theses full of dry love by fake scientists were, to be fair, amusing in their own right, but that's all they were, and absolutely lacked whatever it took to convince other people.

"That's just because you have a narrow mind."

"Have you ever heard of the word privacy?"

"It's not my fault. I see what I see and I hear what I hear. And by the way, trying to run away is futile. No matter where you go, I'll know you like I know myself."

"So you have remote viewing and clairaudience, too!" Kunagisa said. "I know a lot of people with special powers, but this is the first time I've ever met someone with so many. Multimulti. Amazing."

Despite knowing that our pasts, futures, and minds were all possibly being read right now, Kunagisa was without a care in the world. Or maybe she didn't have any secrets to keep.

"I really wanted psychokinesis, actually, but I ended up gravitating toward ESP for some reason. Too bad… I mean, doesn't teleportation seem so convenient?"

Psychokinesis□abbreviated as PK□and ESP were academically defined as two completely different abilities. In mainstream parapsychology, it's often said that the existence of ESP might be

supportable with evidence, though the same cannot be said about PK. This is because the idea of PK is something completely inhuman, while ESP is simply an extension of actual human senses.

“Fortune-telling is about all I can do with just ESP. It’s not such a useful ability,” Maki said with a sigh.

Certainly there wasn’t much she could have done apart from fortune-telling, but I still felt skeptical about the whole idea.

“Maki, can you prove that you have these special powers?”

“I don’t think I need to. How would you, for example, prove that ‘you are you yourself’? Would you show us your driver’s license? Would you be convinced if I had a Superpowers License? It doesn’t matter anyway. Whether you think it’s true or think it’s a lie or think it’s something else, that doesn’t affect anything anyway. Just like my knowing everything doesn’t change anything.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“You’re a suspicious one, aren’t you. Ah, okay, how about I give you your fortune again?” she said out of the blue, grinning at me.

Damn, I hadn’t seen this coming.

“We got off track the first time, after all… Yeah, let’s do it. It’s a good opportunity for you. I almost never tell fortunes for free.”

“I’ll pass.”

“Quick answer. You really don’t want me to, huh? Heheh, my mentor always taught me to ‘go out of the way where others hesitate,’ so that’s what I do.”

“I can’t help but wonder if your mentor meant something else.”

“You’re quite a liar, aren’t you?” she began her session, heedlessly. “You don’t like showing your emotions, but you aren’t good at controlling them either, so you have many regrets. Even though you let yourself get pushed around by other people’s opinions, you’re quite independent. When faced with a challenge, you run away

without a second thought, but you're not dumb. And, you don't like competition. Sound about right?"

"Isn't that what you people call a 'cold reading'?" I shot back. "You could've just said anything. Those are all things that hold true for any person, to some extent."

"Is that so? Hmm, maybe. Then let's talk about your relationship with Kunagisa. What we call a compatibility reading. Hmm, both you and Kunagisa are the type who don't need friends. Yet for some reason you stick together. And the reason for that is? Oh my, this part is fairly warped. You stay by her side because you're jealous of her. And while you're jealous of her ability to express herself freely, she somehow looks unhappy, regardless of whether or not she really is. You see this girl who has everything you want and can do all the things you can't do, yet she is still, for some reason, unhappy, and that makes you feel better. That makes you feel like it doesn't matter if you can't get what you want."

"Really?" Kunagisa gave me a confused look. Whether it was true or not, it wasn't okay to say such things right in front of her.

I shook my head. "No, Maki, I think you've got me all wrong. I'm not such a complicated guy. I'm simple as could be."

"Yeah, well, maybe, maybe not."

"Hey, Maki," Kunagisa said, moving closer to her. "If that's really the case, then why do I spend time with Iichan?"

"Sorry, but I can't seem to read your mind or past." Maki gave a gentle shrug. "Occasionally I meet someone like that. I guess it's a compatibility issue or something, but their surroundings also grow ambiguous and hard to decipher. It's like I'm in a dim place, and it's a little unsettling. It puts me in a bad mood."

So that's why she was venting on me.

How awful.

"Maki, in light of the occasion, I'll go ahead and ask a question, too. How does it feel to be able to see the future and read people's

minds and such?" Shinya asked. "I'm just curious."

"Hmm. That's like asking how things look to spiders with their eight eyes. To attempt a simple explanation, it's like watching TV. It's like the entire room is covered with TVs, and I don't have a remote. I can't turn them off, and I can't change the channels, so all I can do is watch. It's like having a few more brains than regular people, if you can imagine that."

Yeah, like I could.

"Now, what's his face got us a little off-topic, Kunagisa, but I still haven't heard why you came to this island."

"It was just on a whim, I'm telling you."

"No. I may not be able to read you, but I know that's not why."

Kunagisa wheezed out a strange sigh. She seemed a little troubled. I wasn't a big fan of Maki's way of posing the question, but to be honest, I had been wondering about it myself. For what reason had Kunagisa, the ultimate shut-in with no equal, been compelled to travel all the way out here to Wet Crow's Feather Island?

"Okay, I'll tell you," she finally said with a piece of cheese on her tongue. "I'm interested in an incident that took place here in the past."

3

But I didn't get the chance to learn anything more.

"What do you mean, 'incident'?" I was just about to ask, but nearly bit down on my tongue, hard. Thus, I was unable to get the words out. But even if I miraculously had somehow, it never would've reached Kunagisa's ears, nor anyone else's ears, including my own.

It would have been drowned out by the other noise. The shaking.

I soon realized it was an earthquake.

"Gah!" Shinya exclaimed.

"Everyone, please, stay calm!" urged Hikari, whose profession demanded that she remain cool no matter what happened. But I hardly took her advice to heart.

Maki, who looked as if she had been expecting the earthquake all along, reclined on the couch without a hint of worry.

I tried to recall what I had learned about earthquakes back in my first year of junior high school, when I was still in Japan. Supposedly they would start with small tremors, and then get bigger and bigger. I couldn't quite recall which were S waves and which were P waves, or figure out which were horizontal and which were vertical tremors, but that didn't matter.

At any rate, the strength of the shaking had jumped a few levels. In a panic, I shoved Kunagisa□whose expression said "I have no idea what's going on"□onto the sofa and threw myself on top of her. There was a chandelier right above her. If that were to fall, she wouldn't stand a chance of survival with that tiny stature of hers. That was my thinking at the time, anyway.

But my efforts seemed to have been in vain, because not a moment

later, the shaking died down. Of course, when I say “not a moment later,” I mean in terms of real time. To me, it felt only slightly less dragging and terrible than five minutes with your hand on a stove.

In reality, the shaking had probably lasted for less than ten seconds.

“Is it over?” I asked, still on top of Kunagisa.

“Yeah,” Maki answered. It was the word of a prophet, and probably trustworthy. Meanwhile, Kunagisa groaned with her face buried in the sofa, so I got off her for the time being.

“An earthquake… It was pretty big, too. I wonder what it rated on the scale,” Shinya said, looking around the room. The glasses and bottles on the table had fallen, and Hikari had already reflexively begun to clean.

“Pardon me, Hikari. I’m going to borrow the phone. I’m worried about Kanami.”

Shinya pointed to the house phone. Hikari nodded. He headed to the white phone by the cabinet.

“Hikari, do you have a radio or something?” I asked. “I want to check the earthquake’s level. Oh, Tomo, could you look it up on the Internet?”

“Well, there’s probably already been a breaking news bulletin. We’re technically in Kyoto prefecture right now, aren’t we? Or maybe not?”

“It was a level 3 or 4. I can’t quite pinpoint the epicenter, but it’s probably around Maizuru, where the level would be at 5,” Maki said quite matter-of-factly. “And it seems like there weren’t many injuries, even in urban areas.”

“How do you know?” Perhaps it was inelegant of me to pose such a question, but it just felt like the natural thing to say.

She let out a big sigh before answering. “It’s like I’ve been telling you, I just know. You may be smart, but you sure are slow. Don’t have much of a memory either, it would seem. Hey wait, doesn’t

that make you stupid? Anyway, to use an expression, I can see these things clear as day. Ibuki and the others are all fine."

"Ah, remote viewing and clairaudience, was it?"

Distance wasn't a factor for her. She could glance at a TV somewhere far across the sea and predict what would appear there next. Compound ESP.

But even if she had just been making all of this up, there was no way to check. She hadn't said anything that couldn't be waved off with some explanation.

It was probably true, however, that the mansion hadn't suffered much damage. Good to know.

Shinya returned from the phone. "Kanami's fine," he said. "She says she's in the atelier. Some paint cans fell off the shelf. It sounds like a big hassle, but at least she's not hurt."

"Should you go over there?"

He was her caretaker after all, and even if he hadn't been, he must've been worried about her, seeing as she couldn't walk.

But he spread his arms and said, "Nah, no need. She would probably get ticked off if I did."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because she told me not to come," he replied with a pained expression of humility. "She says she's working right now. In fact, she's working on your portrait. Sounds like she's going to turn it into a real masterpiece, so I'd better not bother her."

"Even with Ibuki's talent, there's no hope if she used such a terrible model…"

"You really hate me, don't you?"

"Yup," Maki nodded with a straight face.

Geez.

Well, whatever. That's how life had always gone for me anyway.

I looked over at Hikari.

"Does this happen here a lot? Earthquakes, I mean."

"Not a lot, really… Shinya, you've been through a few, right?"

"Yes, but this one was unusually big."

"I wonder if any furniture fell over. I'm a little worried."

"If you're going to fix things up, I'll help."

"No, it wouldn't be right. We'll deal with it tomorrow under Rei's guidance."

Hikari flashed a sweet smile. If she were a mother, her kids would grow up proper for sure. If we hadn't met in this kind of place under these kinds of circumstances, I definitely would've fallen for her. Or at least, I thought I would. It was never going to happen, but I thought so.

"Teehee. That was my first earthquake in a while," Kunagisa mumbled, scratching her blue hair and finally getting up from the sofa. "I wonder if my computers are all right. They should be. If the epicenter was in Maizuru, the condo should be okay, too. Boy, this takes me back to the Great Hanshin quake. Say, Iichan, you were already in Houston in those days, right?"

"Yup, I think I was." I vaguely remembered seeing something about it on the news back in my tiny room in America.

"That was a really tough time for me. I was still in Kobe back then. Most of my computers crashing for real. I was so startled."

Was "startled" really the most appropriate word to describe living through that disaster?

"So shouldn't you be worried about your computers? You must be

fully crammed with cheese by now. Let's go back to your room already."

It seemed like the time was right, so I decided to leave the living room. I didn't trust that I had the self-control to stay cool if I had to talk to Maki anymore. It seemed like a good time to split.

As if reading my every thought, Maki's gaze burned a hole through my back, and it took every ounce of willpower in my body to ignore her. I pulled Kunagisa by the arm and took her back to her room.

The three PCs (I mean two PCs and one workstation) in her room remained securely situated in the computer rack, and the room had suffered no damage.

Kunagisa let out a big yawn and stretched. "I'm turning in for today. Having a full stomach really makes you sleepy, huh? Iichan, undo my hair."

"Do it yourself, will you?"

"Come on, it's hard to undo a ponytail by myself. I'm not flexible. It's not that I can't do it, but I'll start aching. I've broken bones that way, y'know."

"I get it, I get it. You're really adorable, you know that?"

I removed the band from her hair and ran a comb through it. Tomo Kunagisa let out a naughty little giggle. Once I was finished, she dove into bed. She sunk herself into the white mattress and rolled around joyously.

"Take off that coat. How many times do I have to tell you? And aren't you hot?"

"This coat has special memories attached, so no dice."

"Memories, huh?"

What were they? Even our dear ESP-endowed fortune-teller, Maki Himena, couldn't read Kunagisa's mind or past… Maybe they had something to do with the Team.

“Anyway, Iichan, Kanami and Akane are pretty terrible, but you and Maki don’t seem to be on the best of terms either.”

“Well, it’s more like she harasses me for no reason,” I said, thinking about how similar this was to what Kanami had said. “I don’t have any problems with her in particular.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet. You’re not aggressive enough to hate or resent people. At the very worst, you get annoyed, isn’t that right?”

“You think? That’s interesting.”

“Just joking,” she snickered and held her grin. “But Iichan, you’ve really never fallen in love with someone before, have you?”

“Nope.”

“I love that about you.”

Snicker snicker.

“…”

Strange. She was being weirdly feisty. I wondered if maybe that ginger ale had really been wine. I’d never seen her drunk before, so I couldn’t imagine what she would be like.

“By the way, Tomo.”

“Vat eez eet?”

“Do you believe in superpowers?”

“Hmm… If they existed, I wouldn’t mind at all,” she said, grinning. “I don’t really want any, but you can always dream. It’s better for Santa Claus to exist than for him not to, right? It’s just like that.”

“You’re so laid back.”

She wouldn’t mind. Hmm, indeed.

That was surprisingly insightful. Whether or not they existed, it wouldn’t have much of an effect on my daily life. Now was a bit of

an exception.

Because we were on this island?

Because we were on this island.

“I’m gonna go back to my room and turn in, too. See ya tomorrow. If you’re planning to sleep now, I’ll come wake you tomorrow, so let’s have breakfast together.”

“Hey, Iichan,” Kunagisa, still lying face-up on her bed, called to me. “Let’s fool around.”

She beckoned to me.

I paused, just for a second.

“No,” I said.

“Hmph! Good for nothing. Coward! Chicken pot pie!”

Yeah, yeah, I said, and shut the door, went downstairs, and headed to the storeroom where I was staying. It would have been truly awful to run into Maki in the hallway or something, but luckily no such thing occurred. Perhaps she was still busy chatting it up with Shinya.

When I got to my room, I realized that it had a lock. Maybe it shouldn’t have been a surprise, seeing as it was supposed to be a storage room, but I couldn’t help wondering about being trapped inside if someone were to lock it while I was asleep. There was no way I could reach the window even if I stood on the chair, so it really would be like a prison cell. Then again, there was nothing anyone could gain by locking me up, so it was probably just excessive worry.

I entered, curled up on my futon, and stared at the ceiling in thought.

“……”

I was of course thinking about what Maki had said earlier.

Oh my, this part is fairly warped. You stay by her side because you're jealous of her. And while you're jealous of her ability to express herself freely, she somehow looks unhappy, regardless of whether or not she really is. You see this girl who has everything you want and can do all the things you can't do, yet she is still, for some reason, unhappy, and that makes you feel better. That makes you feel like it doesn't matter if you can't get what you want.

"Ha!"

Dammit.

"She's exactly right…"

Akane of the Seven Fools had described Kunagisa and I as a codependent pair, but really, Maki's opinion was closer to the truth.

To me, Tomo Kunagisa represented the thing I most wanted to be.

No, that wasn't it. That wasn't it. To me, she was then…

Then…

"Then what?"

The reason I chose a university in Kyoto rather than Kobe was because she had moved to Kyoto. I also couldn't deny that she was one of the reasons I left Houston.

Why had I done all that?

As Kunagisa had said, I wasn't aggressive enough to have feelings like love or hate. Even if someone were to bother me, it was a feeling no different from being annoyed when it rains. No matter how much disdain Maki had for me, no matter how many malicious comments Kanami spat at me, no emotion welled up in me about it.

I couldn't help but wonder. Was I really human?

I didn't understand other people's feelings at all.

If they really existed.

If superpowers like the ones Maki claimed to use really existed, perhaps I wanted some myself.

“Nah, I don’t,” I reconsidered.

If I could understand people’s feelings, life would just be that much more annoying. I wasn’t looking for a life with an open Pandora’s box. I didn’t have the nerve for it.

“Such nonsense…”

I hate trips. I just end up thinking too much. Well, I don’t know about too much, but the kind of dangerous thoughts that can wreck you.

Four more days.

I could be patient…

I didn’t hate being patient.

Or at least, I was used to it.

Suffering and pain.

I was damn well used to it.

“Still, it doesn’t feel great.”

Damn, I want to return to my tranquil, quotidian life across the sea, I thought as I fell into the night.

But the following morning I would realize something.

The previous three days had been plenty tranquil and quotidian.

FOURTH DAY (1)
One Decapitation

0

You can always go higher, but at the very top, down is all there is.

1

It was a dreadful sight.

If I were to compare it to something, let's see, yeah, okay. Gruber Norbert's painting The River. The same sort of creepy, marbled river ran through the near half of Kanami's atelier.

Seemingly due to the previous night's earthquake, cans of paint lay scattered around the room, and the simple, ironpole shelf had fallen over as well. The earthquake had caused the shelf to tip, spilling cans everywhere, their contents dumped on the floor, and The River was the result. It was a feasible theory, and that's no doubt how it had happened.

But while it was a bizarre enough spectacle on its own, the real issue lay on the opposite bank of the river. It was beyond imagination or speculation and couldn't be written off as the earthquake's doing. An earthquake capable of that didn't exist.

The facedown body of a person lay on the floor, with a noticeable vacancy from the neck up.

A headless corpse.

A decapitated corpse.

It didn't matter much what words you chose to describe it; it was what it was.

"…"

The body with the missing head was clad in the same dress Kanami had been wearing the previous day. That exquisite-looking dress that Kanami had boasted would never get dirty while she was painting was now stained dark red with blood. It didn't look wearable anymore.

What's more, there was no longer anyone to wear it.

Or let's be more specific.

The wearer was no longer alive.

"This is…grotesque," I uttered reflexively. It went without saying, but the words just came out.

The room smelled like paint thinner.

Next to Kanami's fallen body were a wheelchair facing in a random direction and a single canvas. It was far away so I wasn't sure, but the painting appeared to be my portrait.

It was beautiful, a masterwork. Even from that distance, separated by the river, I could tell. I felt the shock with my body, not with my mind. In some ways it was more disturbing than the sight of the decapitated corpse.

I recalled what Kanami had said the previous day.

It's not art if you get to pick who looks at it.

Point taken… This one was it.

Without a doubt, Kanami Ibuki was a genius.

To the point that it made me tremble.

And this made her death all the more devastating. It had been a long time since I had felt devastated by anything, but I was truly devastated by this.

By Kanami's death.

By Kanami Ibuki's death.

"Why?"

Yes, Kanami Ibuki was dead.

I mean, who could stay alive after their head's been chopped off? Even Rasputin couldn't have survived a decapitation. And Kanami was a physically normal human being.

"Well, we shouldn't just leave her like this," I said, breaking everyone's silence.

I looked over at Kunagisa. Sticking out her lower lip, she was looking at Kanami's body dubiously, quizzically. Was she skeptical about something? But now probably wasn't the time to be thinking about such things. If I had to give a reason for each and every one of Kunagisa's actions, I'd be spending my entire life doing nothing else.

As I tried to take a step, she tugged at my arm.

"Iichan, wait a sec."

"Huh? Why?"

"The paint isn't dry yet."

"Hmm? Oh, yeah." Crouching down and checking with the tip of my finger, I found that she was right. My middle finger turned marble-colored. "But now isn't really the time to worry about things like that," I objected. There was a severed corpse right in front of us. To worry about dirtying your shoes at a time like this was beyond trivial.

"Hey, I said wait." Before I knew what she was getting at, Kunagisa

took off that black coat of hers and tossed it in the middle of the river of paint. It was now like a stepping-stone in the river.

“Wasn’t that your precious coat?”

“The circumstances call for it.”

I made to say something about her just tossing her memories off like they were nothing, but as she suggested, there was a bigger issue at hand right now. Besides, what’s done is done. With little recourse, I jumped to the coat, then to the other side of the river.

“…”

I groaned.

It had been quite a while since I’d last seen a headless body up close. I removed my sweatshirt and placed it over Kanami’s upper body.

I looked back toward the door, where everyone was standing, and slowly shook my head.

I didn’t need to open my mouth.

“Everyone,” Iria finally said, “could I have us all gather in the dining room? I think we need to discuss what we’ll do from here on out.”

With that, she made her way for the hall. The four maids, Rei, Akari, Hikari, and Teruko, quickly followed close behind. Finally, the other guests began filing out of the atelier.

The last ones to remain in the room were Kunagisa, me and Shinya.

He was staring at Kanami’s body, his face pale and blank.

“Shinya…” Stepping back on the coat, I returned to the entrance side. “Let’s go, there’s…”

There was no point in staying there, but I dared not finish.

“Oh…yeah. Right.”

His mind was off in a very different place. Despite his response, he made no attempt to move. He stood completely rigid, his mind unable to comprehend, refusing to comprehend the sight before his eyes.

I understood how he felt.

If the same thing had happened to Kunagisa, I probably would have been the same way. No, that’s not right. I probably would have broken down and started screaming. I know that’s hard to imagine for a guy like me, who, as Maki said, “doesn’t like showing my emotions,” but that’s probably what would have happened.

In that respect, Shinya was truly admirable.

He didn’t look too good, but at least he hadn’t broken down. And he could even speak. His mental faculties remained intact, albeit just barely.

This is what separated him from me.

I was just a kid.

Shinya was an adult.

I didn’t know what kind of relationship Shinya and Kanami had, whether he was just her caretaker, or something more, or something less.

However.

Remembering the sad look in his eyes the previous night…

And seeing him now, I somehow understood.

“Iichan, let’s go ahead.” Kunagisa tugged my arm, this time to urge me to move.

“Yeah.”

And thus ended our tranquil lives on the island.

Thus opened the next act.

2

The morning of the fourth day on the island had started extremely normal. Really, extremely normal.

I awoke the same as always. By the time I got to Kunagisa's room, she was already awake and sitting at her computers. She said she was checking her e-mail. "Do my hair," she said, without so much as a good morning. I put the hair on the top of her head in two tails, what we called a "twin tail." I figured it would be easy enough for her to undo it herself this time.

"I feel like breakfast today," she said, so we headed for the dining room. Peeking into the living room on the way, I found that Maki and Shinya were still there drinking wine. They must have been up all night drinking. They sure aren't paying their age any mind, I thought, but of course I stayed quiet.

Out of courtesy, I invited them to breakfast and they accepted. The four of us entered the dining room. Sitting at the table were Akane and, making a rare appearance, Iria.

"Oh, what an unusual occurrence," Iria also said. "To have everyone gathered like this even in the morning… Well, it feels like more than chance. Shall I call in the others? It would be nice to all do breakfast together."

She summoned the nearby Akari and asked her to go fetch Yayoi, who was no doubt in the kitchen, and the other maids.

"Well, I'll go fetch Kanami," Shinya said. "She's probably all done painting by now anyway. Hmm, I wonder if she's still sleeping… Eh, she doesn't get cranky in the morning. Despite her lousy personality."

He chuckled a bit at his own line and looked at me. "Hope you're

looking forward to seeing that picture," he said, and left the dining room.

It would have been the first time Kunagisa and I had done breakfast with the entire group□but it never actually happened.

When Shinya returned to the dining hall, what he brought was the news of Kanami's death.

"Kanami's been…murdered."

That's how he phrased it, anyway, and few dead bodies could express that better than that. There was no way she'd died of sickness or an accident, or even suicide□she was missing from the neck up.

But still…

A murder case.

And not just a murder, but…

"Me, I was… Right. After dinner, I was with Kunagisa the whole time. I took a bath in her room, then she said she was hungry, so we went to the living room. On the way we ran into Akari. Isn't that right? Yes. In the living room we met Hikari, Maki, and Shinya, and then…the earthquake. There was an earthquake, right? We were in the living room until that earthquake occurred. After that, I took Kunagisa back to her room, and then… I went to sleep. I woke up today at six, and I've been with Kunagisa ever since."

I tried my best to sound calm, even under everyone's gaze.

An alibi check.

Why we had to start with me, I don't know, but Iria had requested it, so there was no choice. It seemed she viewed me as the prime suspect.

The dining room.

Eating my slightly cold breakfast.

No one else seemed to be able to eat after seeing the headless corpse, and indeed I was feeling pretty squeamish myself, but Yayoi's cooking was so good, I couldn't just let it all go to waste.

The round table.

Iria, Rei, Akari, Hikari, Teruko, Akane, Maki, Yayoi, Shinya, Tomo Kunagisa, myself. We were all sitting in our usual seats, with only Kanami's seat, at the five o'clock position, empty. It would never be filled.

Iria tilted her head at me a bit in response to my testimony. Then she glanced over at the one o'clock seat. "Hikari, is that true?"

"Yes," the maid nodded. "Up until the earthquake occurred… Um… one o'clock, was it? Yes, one o'clock. The five of us including me were talking the whole time. I can vouch for that."

"Did anyone get up and leave for a while?"

"No," Hikari said with a bit of uncertainty. "I don't think so. Although I couldn't say for certain."

"No one left," Kunagisa said, coming to her rescue. "And I've got a perfect memory. Nobody left the living room."

"Is that so?" Iria closed her eyes. "In that case, you and Kunagisa, Sakaki, Himena, and Hikari can all account for one another up until the earthquake, is that right? How about after the earthquake?"

"I slept alone, so I suppose I don't have an alibi."

"Thank you. Well then, I suppose I should go ahead and give my alibi next. Last night I was with Rei and Sashirono in my room talking. Yesterday's dinner was even more delicious than usual, so I was asking her about the recipes. Isn't that right, Sashirono?"

Possibly because her name had suddenly come up, Yayoi looked a bit startled. "Yes," she nodded quickly.

Rei shrugged a bit, but said nothing. If you thought about it, she must've been a really cool-headed person, given the situation. Of course Teruko was quiet as ever, but Rei was more taciturn than you would have imagined. Whether she was just being loyal to her employer or this was just her natural personality, I wasn't sure.

"The earthquake happened, and then…I decided to go back to my room," Yayoi said as if struggling to remember.

"That's right," Iria nodded. "After that, Rei and I were up all night talking. Kunagisa will be leaving soon, so I thought we should discuss the idea of holding some kind of fun event… You know, like a farewell party. That's the tradition here. Anyway, we ended up forgoing sleep, so I just came straight here for breakfast."

In other words, Iria and Rei had perfect alibis. Yayoi, like Kunagisa and I, had an alibi up until the earthquake.

"Shinya and I have complete alibis as well," Maki said. "Kunagisa and the rest can confirm that up until the earthquake, and Shinya and I can vouch for each other after that. My, alcohol is just wonderful."

Just how trustworthy was a drunk person's testimony? Maki must've known I was thinking that, because she glared at me. But without a word to me, she turned to Shinya. "Isn't that right?" she asked.

"Ah… Yes," he replied vacantly.

"Hmm… Hikari, what did you do after the earthquake?"

"I went back to our room. Akari and Teruko were there, too. After that, I went to bed. I woke up today at five o'clock, and then got back to work…"

"What about Akari and Teruko then? Akari, answer."

"After dinner, we didn't have any work left to do, so…" Akari paused with a hand to her cheek as she tried to think. "Teruko and I were together in our room the whole time. Then the earthquake happened, and Hikari came back soon after that. That's when we

decided to go to bed."

"The three of you share one room?" I asked.

Akari's eyes shot in my direction as if she never would've guessed I would speak up. "Yes, the three of us share a room. Is something wrong with that?"

"Oh no, nothing."

Just wondering. I bowed to her. I wanted to ask if they shared the same futon as well, but I decided to stay quiet.

Hmm…

That meant that Akari and Teruko had solid alibis up until the earthquake as well. After that, they had all gone to bed, so they couldn't really vouch for each other.

Teruko nodded a bit after listening to Akari's testimony, but ultimately said nothing. It was a simple gesture, but somehow hard to understand.

"This is becoming quite complicated." Iria looked toward the last possible suspect, Akane Sonoyama. "What about you?" she said. "What were you doing last night?"

Akane, who had been soaking in the situation up until now with arms folded and mouth shut, let out a sigh and opened just one eye. "Judging from the fact that nobody's mentioned my name up until now, it's probably pretty obvious, but, yep, I wasn't with anyone last night." She spoke unhesitatingly. "After I finished dinner, I went back to my room and got on the computer. I was working on some modeling, and, well, I'll spare you the boring details. There should be a log, so you could check that for proof, but I suppose that kind of thing can be forged. I guess you couldn't call it an alibi."

"I don't know much about computers. What do you think, Kunagisa?"

"Hmm?" Kunagisa's head popped up (hell of a time to be

daydreaming). “Oh. With a degree of skill, a person could easily manipulate something as simple as a log. Akane, how much do you know about computers?”

Akane smirked. “There’s probably no point in my answering that.”

“Oh, okay,” Kunagisa nodded. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. With the right tools, even an amateur could alter a log. It’s not like it’s very hard. You can find that kind of software all over the place.”

“Isn’t there a way to see if the log’s been altered?” I asked.

“There is, but that can be faked, too. Just about anything’s possible with a computer, you see, so it’s hard to use one to confirm an alibi.”

Tomo Kunagisa. Invited to this island as the leader of the Team. She was peerless in her field, so there was no way she was wrong. In which case, Akane had no alibi to speak of.

Akane let out another sigh. “But I suppose I have to make a defense for myself. I do hold myself dear. So I’ll just go ahead and say it: I didn’t do it. Certainly I hate artists, but I don’t think they’re worth killing. They’re already dead when they’re alive. It wouldn’t be worth the effort. You can’t pen this on me.”

She probably meant to say, “You can’t pin this on me,” but at any rate, she didn’t seem to be bluffing or playing tough, and it didn’t seem like an act, either.

“Okay, everyone please hold on a minute,” Iria requested. “I need to work this out in my head.”

“Um, before that, please hold on,” I said to her. The conversation was growing bizarre. Hold on before we hold on? “Um, Iria, what exactly are you trying to do?”

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s just that this all feels really strange to me… Of course, this is your island and your mansion, so I know it’s probably better not to say anything, plus I’m not even really a guest, but I’m asking

anyway. What exactly are you trying to do?"

"Well, I'm trying to get to the bottom of this, of course." She smiled softly. "It seems pretty clear to me," she continued, "that Ibuki was murdered by someone. And in this case, that means she was murdered by someone in this room. As you said, this is my island and my mansion. One of the guests I've invited here has been killed, and the murderer is right here. Surely you don't think we can just leave this alone?"

She smiled and glanced over the crowd.

Indeed, she was right. This was a remote island. A remote, solitary island, completely isolated.

Wet Crow's Feather Island.

If there were twelve people on the island and one was killed, the murderer had to be one of the remaining eleven. Even elementary school students can do that sort of basic arithmetic.

"In any case, another death," Iria said with a sigh.

Huh?

Another? Did she just say "another"?

"And another decapitation, at that… Could it be that this island is cursed? Say, Himena, can you see into that?"

"You're the one who's cursed," Maki answered without missing a beat. "The island is just an island. If anything is cursed, it's you."

As disheartening a statement as that was, Iria replied with amused laughter. "Maybe so."

Ah, it all made sense. It had seemed odd to me that despite her attitude, Maki was able to get along so well with everyone other than me, but now I got it. Nobody else on this island cared about what other people said.

"Mmm, but this is a fairly simple case," Iria remarked. "Maybe

there's no need for detective work. After all, the time of the incident is pretty much laid out for us."

"Is it?"

"It is. You saw it, too, right? All that paint got knocked over during the earthquake, and Ibuki's body was lying on the other side. How wide do you suppose that river of paint was?"

Nobody ventured an answer, so I went ahead. "At a quick glance, I would say about ten feet."

"Right, it's certainly not small enough to jump over. So we can confirm that the murder must have happened before the earthquake."

The shelf had fallen over in the quake, resulting in that marbled river. What did that mean? The quake must have been more intense than I had realized, but that's not all.

What did that river really mean?

"Hold on a second," Akane interrupted. She looked a bit concerned. "This conversation doesn't bode well for me. You know why?"

Because…

Everyone besides Akane had an alibi prior to the earthquake.

I was with Kunagisa the whole time. Same with Hikari, Maki, and Shinya. Same deal with Akari and Teruko. And of course, Iria, Rei, and Yayoi. Everyone had an alibi and could vouch for one another.

Iria was right. There was no way someone could jump that river of paint the earthquake had created. There was no way to cross the river without stepping in the paint and creating footprints.

In which case…

The murder had to have happened before the earthquake. The only one with no alibi at that time was Akane. Indeed, this didn't bode well for her at all.

She clicked her tongue and said, “Iria. I’m just going to ask you straight. Do you think I did it?”

That certainly was straight.

“Yes,” Iria admitted just as directly. “I mean, who else could have?”

“…”

Akane broke eye contact with Iria and fell silent. She was at a loss for an effective argument despite that Seven Fools brain of hers. Feeling some sliver of a connection with her somehow, I wanted to jump in and save her, but if a member of the Seven Fools couldn’t think of a rebuttal, there was no way a program dropout could.

An awkwardness hung in the air for a while, but it was Kunagisa who broke it.

“That’s wrong,” she said. “I don’t think that logic makes sense, Iria.”

“Oh? Why is that?” Iria seemed strangely glad to hear it. “Ah… I see. You’re talking about the possibility of an accomplice. I suppose there is that possibility. That would make everyone’s alibis a little shaky.”

“No, not that. Even if you don’t consider an accomplice, you’re missing something. Right, Iichan?”

“Huh?” I blurted out, completely surprised that I would be pulled into this. “Missing something?”

“Come on, Iichan, tell her. About what happened last night.”

“Something happened…last night?”

“……” Looking fairly irritated, Kunagisa clammed up. This was a fairly rare thing for her. “……”

“What can I say? Unlike you, I have a bad memory.”

“Geez, you really don’t remember? Your memory isn’t bad, it’s nonexistent! Is it even normal to forget something this important?

After the earthquake. Shinya made a call to Kanami, right?"

"…Oh." "Oh." "Oh!"

Hikari and Shinya looked up in surprise, too.

Right. Shinya had called Kanami after the quake and confirmed that she was okay. Confirmed that nothing had happened to her.

Wow, that was important, just like Kunagisa said. What did that mean though? How did things appear now?

"In other words," she explained, "Kanami must have been killed after the earthquake."

"Hold on a sec," Iria said in a bit of a panic, her hand reaching towards Kunagisa. "But that river of paint…"

"Well, Iria, that must mean this…" A brief pause. "The atelier was a locked room."

Everyone exchanged glances for a moment.

That river of paint was unjumpable for sure. It was ten feet wide. Maybe it was possible if you were a long-jumper, but even then, there was no space to get a running start. If you considered that, the murder must have happened before the earthquake, just like Iria said, but then Shinya denied it. Immediately after the earthquake, Kanami hadn't been murdered, let alone beheaded.

"Sakaki," Iria asked him, "was that her voice for sure?"

He looked pale and confused, but at last, he nodded. "Yes, it was definitely Kanami. No mistake. She said she was busy, and that the paint had fallen over so everything was a mess. She had to have been alive after the earthquake."

"I heard him talking on the phone as well," Hikari told her mistress. "He asked me if he could use the house phone and… I think she must have been alive still."

"Yes, still," Shinya spat self-mockingly and clutched his head in

anguish. “If I had only gone to the atelier instead of neglecting my duties… Dammit! I’m scum! I’m nothing but scum!”

“…”

There wasn’t much to say to that. Only that in the end, it wasn’t earthquakes or thunder or fire that was frightening.

It seems there is some kind of solace to be found in regret. It serves as an escape from what’s right before your eyes. You end up pinning all your bad deeds on the “former you.” So it’s hardly self-condemnation.

When you are regretting something, you’re technically being good.

I’m not saying Shinya was a monster. People are just wired that way. If anyone was a monster, it was me, for only being able to nitpick at people’s flaws like this.

“This is starting to get strange,” Akane said, stroking her chin. “According to Shinya, Hikari, and Kunagisa’s testimony, the murder can only have happened after the earthquake. But after the earthquake, the river of paint had already been formed, in which case there is nobody who could have killed her. Hence□”

“Yup, Akane,” Kunagisa interrupted with crooked lips. She had that look she gets when she’s starting to find something interesting. “This is an incredibly strange situation.”

“So that’s what you mean by ‘a locked room’…” Iria nodded, seemingly convinced. “Hmm. Indeed, even now, that paint isn’t dry. You can’t traverse it and enter the room without leaving footprints… Say, Akari, where’s the house phone in Ibuki’s atelier?”

“It’s beside the window, on a phone stand,” Akari answered with great certainty.

“Hrm.” Iria crossed her arms and considered this. “Kunagisa, you’ve posed this question, but I don’t suppose you know the answer already? Do you know who did it?”

“Nope,” Kunagisa answered with weird confidence.

Of course, I didn't know, either.

Nobody knew.

"What about the window? Is it possible that the person entered through the window?" Shinya asked.

It was Hikari who answered him. "But it's the second floor. I don't think it's possible. And I'm pretty sure that window is locked from the inside, so□"

"It can't be opened from the outside at all?" I asked.

"Probably not," she replied.

Check. So the window was impossible, and so was the door. It couldn't have happened before the earthquake or after the earthquake, which meant…

Okay.

We were at a complete dead end.

Everyone fell into silence once more. And then, eyes started shifting back toward Akane.

"Huh?" She seemed a little surprised. "Hey, I thought I had cleared myself."

"Maybe not," Iria said. "Clearing that paint river is impossible, right? So, ultimately, it must have been before the earthquake."

"What about what Shinya said?"

"He could've been tricked. Maybe it was an auditory hallucination or something."

An auditory hallucination? Nonsense. It was beyond nonsense. I had to say something. "I think that's just what you want to believe."

"I don't think so," opined Iria, unfazed by my opinion. "Even supposing it wasn't an auditory hallucination, it could have easily

been some other sort of misunderstanding. There's no crossing that river of paint, that much is for sure. Thus, it's only logical to presume the murder happened before the earthquake, in which case it couldn't be anyone but Akane."

"This isn't good," Akane said, seeming truly worried despite her wry smile. "I know this probably won't help my case any, but I can't help but feel like Akari and Teruko's alibi is a little sketchy. I mean, family members vouching for each other? It wouldn't hold up in a court of law."

"We're not talking about a court of law," Iria stated flatly.

"I didn't think so," Akane said as if she expected such a response. "Still, determining the criminal by process of elimination isn't quite fair to me. It's silly. And simply ignoring Sakaki's testimony isn't exactly what I would call logical thinking. It's selective thinking."

"Selective thinking?"

Akane shot me a look, as if to say, "Will you please explain?"

"A confirmation bias," I frantically recalled from my program training, desperate not to make a fool out of myself in my senior's presence. "In other words, it means when you only consider testimonies and evidence that suit your opinion and write off all evidence to the contrary as some kind of fluke. Actually, for supernatural ability experiments, it's"□my eyes wandered over to Maki□"it's mentioned a lot. 'Dry love,' was it? They obsess over any evidence that suggests these abilities exist while ignoring any evidence that suggests they don't. It's their way of getting desirable results□"

"I don't really follow you."

I had gone to all that effort to remember these things, and Iria wasn't even letting me finish. What a waste of breath.

Akane sighed deeply.

"I suppose Ibuki and I were on pretty awful terms…"

I recalled their nasty bickering from the previous night's dinner. It didn't exactly do wonders for her case. Certainly it wasn't only Akane's lack of an alibi that made Iria doubt her so much, but this as well.

Of course, it wasn't that I didn't understand how Iria felt. If you took Shinya's testimony into account, even Akane couldn't be a suspect.

An uncommitable crime. With no suspects. One victim, zero suspects. The situation didn't make any sense. And thus to fix it…

"Sakaki's testimony seems a little shady after all," Iria said, staring right at him. "Even if it's not a lie, it could be some kind of misperception or dream or some such."

"But I heard him talking on the phone," Hikari said.

Iria shook her head. "It's not like you heard Ibuki's voice, right? Sakaki is the only one who heard her voice directly, which means□"

"Come on, that's…" Shinya started to protest, but as if realizing he had no basis for an argument, he went silent.

"Hmm. Well, if that's the way it is, I guess there's no choice but to suspect me. That's one way to look at things, anyway," Akane said, almost as if she was talking about someone else. Even now, she didn't seem to be lying or acting. Akane Sonoyama, ER3 System, Seven Fools. She seemed all too used to this kind of pandemonium. "But still, you don't have any proof. Iria, even if you are the mistress of this island and this mansion, you wouldn't treat me like a criminal without any proof, would you? This may not be a court of law here, as you say, but it's not some dusty old detective novel, either, right? You can't just assume I'm the criminal based on this unformulaic process of elimination and selective thinking. Nobody can do that."

"But Sonoyama, you also can't prove that you're not the criminal."

"You can't put it on the innocent to prove their innocence. Proving that something can't be proved doesn't constitute a proof. I'm

innocent until proven guilty.”

“You’re talking law again.”

Akane’s shoulders slumped. “Well, what’s your point, Iria? So I’m the prime suspect. Fine. That’s absolutely right. I’m the only one with no alibi before the earthquake. Nobody could have entered the atelier after the earthquake. Sure, I’m with you on that, too. Therefore, Sakaki’s testimony becomes suspicious. Makes sense. So what now?”

So…what now?

“What should we do?” Iria looked around the table with a troubled expression. It seemed she hadn’t thought any further than that. How anticlimactic.

“Throw me to the police or whatever you want,” Akane said, brushing the bangs from her face.

Akane of the Seven Fools being sent off to the police?

“I hate the police…” Iria stared up at the ceiling and looked only more lost. “What to do?”

A heaviness filled the air once again.

“Hey, Tomo,” I whispered to Kunagisa.

“What’s up, Iichan?”

“Isn’t there some way to stop this inquisition?”

“There is.”

“There is?”

“Yeah, but”□she looked at me□“you ought to say it, not me.”

“…All right.” I nodded, then raised my hand.

“Okay, speak up,” Iria called on me with a curious look. Ah, good. It would have hurt if she’d ignored me.

“I have a suggestion.”

“Yes?”

“How about using the room I’ve been staying in? It looks like you can only lock and unlock it from the outside. What if we kept Akane there for a while?”

“Keep me there?” Akane eyed me dubiously. “Do you mean imprison?”

“Not imprison, exactly. Not imprisonment, just…a brief quarantine. Iria, I think the biggest thing we have to fear right now is that this turns into a string of murders. Kanami was killed. Okay, that’s already said and done. I hate to be so frank about it, but what’s done is done. But more important, we can’t let anyone else die. The quickest way to deal with a situation like this is to quarantine the prime suspect. If Akane really is the murderer, naturally she won’t be able to commit any more murders. If, on the other hand, someone else used some kind of trick and managed to sneak in and kill Kanami after the earthquake, then that person would be brought to a standstill. After all, if they tried anything again, it would prove Akane’s innocence.”

I looked around to see people’s responses.

“In other words, create a state of equilibrium so that the killer can’t make a move. This includes Akane, as well as everyone else. Our alibis are hollow if we consider the possibility of accomplices. The atelier may have been a locked room, but locks are made to be unlocked. There might have been some trick. There might not have been. Either way, it doesn’t matter. Akane might have done it. Someone else might have. Just as I might or might not be the culprit. So I think the best thing to do is create a situation where the killer can’t do anything.”

“Ah, I get it,” Yayoi said, a bit to my surprise. “That makes a lot of sense. I’d have to say I agree. I don’t think there’s a very solid basis for suspecting Sonoyama. Iria’s reasoning seems rather arbitrary.”

Iria gave her a quizzical look.

Nonetheless, Yayoi continued, “I don’t think it’s a bad idea. But you don’t intend to just lock her up forever, right? In such an awful environment?”

I was staying in that awful environment, dammit. Lousy bourgeoisie.

“Well, just until the police arrive,” I explained. “This may be a solitary island, but it shouldn’t take more than a day or two to get enough investigators□”

“I’m not calling the police,” Iria cut in imperiously.

Huh? Pardon me, mademoiselle, did you just utter something insane?

“I mean, what’s the point? Even if we call the police, they’ll just figure Sonoyama was the criminal and it’ll end there. The police won’t help one bit.”

“…?”

It wasn’t Iria’s words that I found suspicious, but her facial expression. The police won’t help one bit? Why did she say that with such a stern face?

“But we can’t just not call the police. If we didn’t, there wouldn’t be any point in establishing an equilibrium.”

“Not necessarily. We just have to piece things together while she’s in there. We’ll track down the real culprit with evidence and reason. Won’t that do?”

“Will you be the one investigating, Iria?” Something about her idea of reasoning didn’t sit well with me at all. But to my surprise, she shook her head.

“No, not me, of course. Don’t you remember? I told you yesterday, didn’t I? In a week□no, six days now□a wonderful, marvelous human being is coming to this island.”

The proverbial detective of this mystery novel. Iria’s favorite.

Iria's hero.

"Surely Aikawa will solve this situation so not a speck of it remains."

Not a speck of it. What an expression. And she didn't look like she was exaggerating, either.

"Six more days, huh?" Akane, who had fallen silent, said cynically, letting her crossed arms drop down beside her. "Well, whatever. Fine fine fine. Fair enough. I don't think I'm suspicious, but if this is what it takes to convince you, what can I say? Iria, I presume we can trust this Aikawa?"

"Yes. Of course." Iria gave a confident nod. You could feel her utmost faith in this hero of hers just from looking at her.

Akane let out one more big sigh. "Got it. Let's do this then."

3

“I wonder if that was really the right thing to do,” I mumbled as I played with Kunagisa’s hair.

She said it was too heavy all tied up high like that and wanted me to redo it. Here I had thought it was adorable, but if she didn’t like it, I had no choice.

Everybody had since split up, and the two of us had gone back to Kunagisa’s room.

“I think it’s okay! It’s pretty much what I had in mind. Akane must be kinda grateful, too. It’s a way better idea than continuing that unproductive bickering, anyway.”

“Hmm, I wonder…”

As the one who had suggested the idea in the first place, I couldn’t imagine Akane was too happy about it. I felt a little guilty. It might well have been the only solution, but I couldn’t help but wonder if there was some other way.

“All done.”

“Thankoo.”

Kunagisa crawled over to her computer rack and sat down with her back to me. Then she switched on the power and started typing away.

“I just… I feel like we’ve wronged Akane.”

“Maybe. But some things can’t be avoided, y’know, Iichan?”

After breakfast, Akane had gone off to my room on her own two feet. It had been decided that Akari and the others would deliver

meals to her directly, and that she would have to call them from the room phone every time she wanted to use the bathroom.

Akane's only request was for a reading lamp, so she could pass the following six days reading books she had brought.

Six days… Objectively speaking, the room wasn't a particularly bad environment. But the door couldn't be unlocked from the inside and the window was way high up, so there was virtually no means of escape. In that sense, it really was imprisonment.

Six days.

It really was too long to be locked up.

"If only Iria would call the police, we wouldn't have to do all this. It's like she's trying to cover up the incident altogether."

"But Iria is right, y'know? If we called the police, they'd blame Akane and close the case right there. Or even if they didn't convict her, she'd be treated as a suspect. I mean, wasn't that what you were trying to avoid? Seriously, one of the Seven Fools becoming a murder suspect?"

"Do you know a lot about the ER3, Tomo?"

"I've got a few acquaintances from over there. But I'm sure you know more than I do."

"The Seven Fools or not, I doubt Akane enjoys criminal immunity…"

"But in that sense, it would be even worse of a situation for me, not to mention Yayoi and Maki, who are both well respected. Nobody needs a scandal like this to deal with. Of course the same goes for Iria. So it's only natural that she isn't calling the police."

"Natural, huh?"

It was probably this island itself that was unnatural. But judging from Iria's demeanor, I got the feeling there was more to the story. Like she had some more fundamental reason for not wanting to call

the cops.

“Do you suppose she has some specific reason for disliking the police?” I asked.

“Well, why don’t you ask her?”

“I doubt she’d tell us.”

“Yeah, maybe not. Anyway, why worry about it? Once this ‘Aikawa’ character Iria’s so crazy about gets here, everything will be solved. It’s just another six days.”

“Sure, but…”

Iria was the mistress of the island, and if she said no police, there was no going against her. For what it was worth, there would probably be no more murders with Akane locked up. Still…

“Say, Tomo.”

“What, Iichan?”

“I want to ask a favor.”

“I accept. What is it?”

“Would you be able to do something about that ‘locked room’?”

“I don’t know, but for you, I’d try.”

There was no need to spend the next six days just sitting around. I was the one who had proposed the course of action in the first place, so I had a duty to give the case some serious thought.

“Yup,” Kunagisa said. “If we can figure this case out quick, we won’t have to keep Akane locked up, whether she did it or not.” She swiveled her chair around to face me. “Here, here,” she beckoned me closer.

I walked over to the computers as told.

“For the time being, I’ve typed up everyone’s alibis.”

Kanami Ibuki

murdered

Akane Sonoyama

before quake: X

after quake: X

Tomo Kunagisa

before quake: O

(Iichan, Hikari, Maki, Shinya)

after quake: X

Yayoi Sashirono

before quake: O (Iria, Rei)

after quake: X

Akari Chiga

before quake: Δ (Teruko)

after quake: X

Hikari Chiga

before quake: O

(Iichan, Tomo, Maki, Shinya)

after quake: X

Teruko Chiga

before quake: Δ (Akari)

after quake: X

Shinya Sakaki

before quake: O

(Iichan, Tomo, Maki, Hikari)

after quake: O (Maki)

Rei Handa

before quake: O (Iria, Yayoi)

after quake: Δ (Iria)

Maki Himena

before quake: O

(Iichan, Tomo, Hikari, Shinya)

after quake: O (Shinya)

Iria Akagami

before quake: O (Rei, Yayoi)

after quake: Δ (Rei)

“Look about right?”

“I understand the O’s and X’s, but what are the deltas?”

“Akane was right about family testimonies. Iria, Rei, Akari, Hikari, and Teruko are pretty much family, so theirs need to be checked out. But y’know, these alibis, I really don’t know about them.”

She scrolled down the screen and checked the chart one more time.

“For now,” I said, “let’s ignore the possibility of an accomplice, as well as the issue of family testimonies. In that case, the ones we can remove from the suspect list for sure are Shinya and Maki…plus, Rei and Iria.”

Four people down. Seven left.

“If Shinya’s testimony is accurate, then the locked room with the paint becomes a problem. But if it’s a lie, that means only Akane could have done it.”

“I can’t imagine why Shinya would lie, though,” objected Kunagisa.

“Well, it could’ve been a misunderstanding or something rather than a lie.”

Well, how about that.

I was starting to sound like Iria.

“But you know,” I insisted, “Akane really is the prime suspect here, objectively speaking.”

“Yeah, you can’t help but think that, looking at this chart. No matter how fair or sympathetic you are, it doesn’t change the fact

that she's the only one without any smidgen of an alibi. If that weren't the case, she probably wouldn't have accepted this whole seclusion idea."

"Yeah, for sure. So, Tomo, do you think Akane did it?"

"I wouldn't say that. Like she argued herself, there's no evidence. You can't decide who the culprit is by elimination alone. We haven't even examined Kanami's body yet."

"Right… And there's the fact that it was a locked room."

"But if you take that into account, nobody could've done the crime. Iichan, you have any ideas about that?"

"Maybe," I said as I pondered. "I might figure something out after a little while. How about you, Tomo?"

"I've got tons of ideas," she said. "Just need to give it a little more thought and it should all fall into place. Oh, and Iichan? Whether or not Shinya's testimony is true, I think the murder happened after the earthquake."

"Huh? Why?"

"That painting of you. Do you really think she could've finished that before the earthquake? I don't think so."

"Well…"

It was tough to say. Kanami was pretty damn fast when it came to painting. But if what Kunagisa said was true, then it was all the more certain that we were dealing with a locked room. That wasn't the most helpful development.

"And there's the headless body itself, Iichan."

I nodded.

Regardless of who killed her, why would they cut her head off?

"They say," I noted, "to beware of swapped identities when a body

shows up with no head, but I don't suppose there's any need to suspect that here. There were twelve people, one's been decapitated, and now there are eleven. And we know exactly who and where those eleven people are."

"Yuppie. If it was one of those three maid sisters who got killed, it would've been a real problem, huh? But with Kanami, there's probably no need to worry about it. If there's someone else on this island, that's a different story."

"Let's not consider that notion, either. If there'd been a thirteenth, or maybe even an nth person beyond the dozen of us, all this narrowing down of suspects and alibi searching would be pointless. I don't know what this great detective coming in six days will have to say about it, but for now let's just worry about the eleven people we know about."

"Yeah," Kunagisa said, gaping at the ceiling. "If we consider the possibility of an accomplice or some kind of remote trickery, only you and I can be taken off the suspect list."

"Why me, too?"

"Cuz I trust you," she answered, flipping over. "Still, why did it have to be decapitated? Is there any reason other than body-switching for it? I wonder… And it wasn't like that was the cause of death."

"True. If it was, there wouldn't have been so little blood. It would've been more like a river of blood. But at a glance, there didn't appear to be any stabbing wounds or anything, so maybe she was poisoned or strangled. I mean, just to speculate."

"I wonder if she went down easy."

"Probably. Her legs didn't work, and though her eyesight had been restored, it definitely wasn't perfect. If you snuck up on her, or even strode up to her, the murder itself must have been easy. And cutting off the head wouldn't be much of a challenge, either."

As long as you didn't hesitate, it would only take a few minutes.

And the culprit, mostly likely, hadn't been hesitant. That was my gut feeling.

"There's no clear motive, either," I said. "Why did Kanami have to be murdered?"

"Nobody has to be murdered. But yeah, I wonder why. Aside from Shinya, everyone met Kanami here, right? Hmm, but maybe that's not the case. Maybe somebody actually had some connection with her before coming here. It wouldn't be so strange."

"I guess you could presume just about anything on that subject." In which case, there was no point in presuming anything.

Kunagisa let out a groan. "Well, let's just worry about these other details first, and figure out who knows who later on."

"How are we gonna do that?"

"Who do you think you're talking to?"

She grinned at me impishly.

Of course.

This blue-haired girl had a "backstory," so to speak.

"Now then, shall we do a crime scene investigation?"

She picked up her nearby digital camera.

4

On the way to Kanami's room, we passed by Yayoi. I meant to greet her, but the mood was, you know, awkward, so I missed my chance. She continued walking in the opposite direction. We had passed right by each other, but it was like she hadn't even noticed us.

"I wonder what she's up to," Kunagisa said. "Weird!"

"She looked kind of worried about something. Or maybe just in deep thought."

"Yep. Since she came from that way, maybe she was looking around Kanami's room. Maybe she had the same idea as us. Solve the case quick so we can all go home."

"Hmm, I wonder. She's been here the longest, right? I doubt she'd suddenly want to just pack up and leave."

"Dunno about that. Personally, I hate islands where murders take place."

"Right, dunno about that."

Just before we'd all scattered from the dining room, Iria had laid down a rule: "Until Aikawa gets here in six days, nobody leaves the island. We're all suspects here, myself included."

In other words, Akane wasn't the only one being imprisoned. It wasn't just curiosity motivating Kunagisa to dig deeper. She wanted to go home as planned. As loose and lazy as she was, she was strangely anal about her schedule.

"Well, either way is good," she said. "I certainly wouldn't mind if Yayoi solved this case for us."

"I don't think that's what she's up to. She had a sort of melancholy,

somber vibe about her. Almost like she'd disposed of evidence or something."

"That would certainly suck a lot for us." Kunagisa eyed me through the digital camera. "Let's hurry up and check it out."

Kanami's door had been left open. You could see the inside of the outward-opening door. Nobody seemed to be around. I wondered what everyone else was doing, except Akane, who was presumably in the storage room. But I decided to set that thought aside for the time being. People will do as they please, insofar as they're allowed. That was true on this island, and it was true anywhere else.

The room still smelled like paint thinner, but the paint seemed to mostly be dry by now. Kanami's body remained in the same place it had been this morning, and looked exactly the same.

"Oh boy…"

There's something terribly comical about a headless body. What makes dead bodies so creepy and terrifying is that emotionless expression on the face, but with no head to display that face, the creepiness and terror is replaced with a sort of ridiculousness. It's like looking at a screwed-up attempt at a plastic model or something.

The marbled river. Kunagisa's tossed coat remained right in the middle.

"By the way, about that coat. How much was it?"

"About ten thousand for a pair of them, I think."

"Dollars?"

"Nah, yen."

Wow, an average price. I was a little surprised. "Well, might as well go inside."

I tried to take a step forward, but Kunagisa tugged on my sleeve just like she had that morning.

“What now?”

“Try jumping.”

“Huh?”

“C’mon. It’s an experiment. Get a little running start here and see if you can jump that paint river. Your athletic skills aren’t so bad, right?”

“They’re not so good, either.”

“Give it a shot.”

“You got it.”

I revved myself up a bit and gave my best leap, but as expected, I couldn’t clear the river. I landed on both feet, only slightly past the center point.

“That’s all you’re gonna get.”

“Hmm.” Kunagisa stepped across, using her coat as a stepping-stone. “If you can’t do it, Shinya’s the only person here who might even have a chance. He’s the only other guy and all.”

“Yeah, but those maids seem pretty able-bodied, to be honest. I mean, they carried all your luggage, including those PCs and the workstation. Those things ain’t light.”

“But they’re all petite, so there’s the simple matter of their stride. Hmm, but then again, people can outperform themselves when push comes to shove. I guess it’s kinda hard to say. Now, let’s see what’s going on with Kanami.”

Kunagisa approached Kanami’s body, camera in hand.

Kunagisa seemed to be particularly interested in examining the body, while I was more concerned with Kanami’s canvases. There were several lying around, including the cherry blossom picture she had smashed up, as well as the redo. I had to tremble at the sight of it. Even I, who had not so much as a passing interest in art, couldn’t

deny that I was looking at “value” itself.

And then there was the painting I had modeled for. Kanami had promised to give it to me, but there was no way I could accept such a thing. The pressure was too much, and I wasn’t so insensitive.

“Though that’s probably nonsense…”

I went to pick up the canvas, but then stopped myself. It might have been bad to leave any fingerprints behind. Then again, it might not have mattered.

Huh?

“Hey, Tomo.”

“Yeah?”

“Isn’t there something weird about this painting?”

“You mean that picture of you? Hmm? What’s weird? It’s a normal painting.”

Kunagisa’s taste certainly wasn’t normal if she thought so, but that was beside the point. Something about the painting was off, in a maddeningly subtle way. It wasn’t anything about the picture itself, but somehow it felt absurd.

“Well, snap a picture of it, will ya? It’s bothering me.”

“Got it. Hmm, I’m still not finding anything unusual over here.” She appeared to be inspecting Kanami’s body.

“Really?” I said, walking over to her.

“Yep. I’m no professional, though. The cause of death is still a mystery, and I can’t narrow down the time of death, either. Without a coroner, it’s probably impossible. If only Iria had invited a medical genius here, too. Heil, Herr Doktor Blackjack! Then again, it would probably be pretty hard without the head.”

“I guess we’re not going to figure anything out here after all.”

“Yep.” Kunagisa lifted up the corpse. Even years ago, she had no qualms about touching a dead body. “Kinda takes me back, y’know? It’s just like the old days.”

“Yeah, you’re right, but… It doesn’t feel like that to me. It’s like I’m seeing a dead body for the first time all over again. I’m feeling uneasy.”

An indescribable anxiety—like when you find a scar on your own body you don’t remember having.

“It’s jamais vu,” Kunagisa told me.

“It’s what?”

“The opposite of déjà vu. It means you feel like you’re doing something for the first time, even though you’ve really done it many times before. Supposedly it happens when your senses have been numbed.”

Then my senses must have been numbed some time long ago.

A lot of things had happened abroad, too…

“Anyway,” Kunagisa said. “There aren’t any stab wounds. So maybe she was strangled after all. And then to hide the bruises, the killer cut her head off.”

“That sounds crazy. Whatever the killer used to cut the head off—knife, ax, hatchet, whatever it was—why didn’t they just use that to kill her?”

“Maybe they did. There are no stab wounds, but that’s just on the body. Maybe they stabbed her in the head.”

“Hey yeah, maybe,” I said. “Speaking of that, where do you suppose the head went? I wonder where the killer took it. I mean, if the killer took it.”

“Half the island is forest. Maybe they buried it somewhere out there. Or they could’ve tossed it out to sea. Disposal probably wasn’t much of a problem.”

“Which brings us back to the question: Why did the killer cut her head off?”

But that question was a dead end.

“I’ve got one more question, Iichan. Take a look at this. The head is cut off from the very base of the neck, right? Why is it cut like that? Don’t you think that if you were going to decapitate someone, the normal place to make the cut would be around the center of the neck?”

The position of the cut was indeed unnaturally low, but I didn’t think it was significant.

“……”

I silently crossed my arms. This crime scene investigation didn’t seem like it would yield any clues after all. At best, we had confirmed that the river of paint couldn’t be jumped. But that seemed more like a step backward than progress.

Kunagisa went over to the phone stand by the window and picked up the receiver.

“Hmm, nothing unusual here, either.”

“You thought there would be?”

“Well, maybe the circuit had been rigged so that calls to this phone would connect to a different phone. But there doesn’t seem to be anything wrong on this end. Doesn’t look like it’s been tinkered with, either.”

“The phone, huh? Say, how’d it go again? What did Kanami say to Shinya?”

“The paint spilled, I’m busy working so don’t bother me, stuff like that. But Shinya should’ve gone to check on her even if she told him not to. That might seem harsh, but it was his duty as her caretaker.”

“You’re right about that. But there’s no use talking about what’s already done.”

And anyway, Shinya would be bearing that burden, and his remorse, from now on. It wasn't particularly our place to lay the blame on him, and there was no need to do so. It's an irrational world, but it's also a world where we have to take responsibility for our own actions. And sometimes we also have to take responsibility for our own lack of action.

I wondered aloud, "Is it possible that they restored the phone back to normal afterward?"

"Well, I wouldn't say it's totally impossible, but it practically is. It's not like plugging and unplugging a cord or something."

"Yeah… I guess we'll have to look at other possibilities. By which I mean the 'locked room' aspect."

"So you think I was lying?"

Suddenly I heard Shinya's voice from behind me, so I spun around. He stood in the doorway with some kind of orange bag in his hands.

"But I could hear Kanami's voice for sure. That's no lie."

He sounded pretty worn out. Understandably.

"I'm not saying you lied, Shinya. I don't see the necessity. But is it possible that the voice you heard wasn't hers?"

"Nope," he shot back. "I'd known Kanami for a long time. There's no way I would mistake her voice. Are you doubting me?"

"It's not like that. There's no reason you would have killed her, after all."

"Who knows? Maybe we weren't on the best of terms."

He gave a weak smile. Then he stepped through the dried paint and approached us. Upon closer inspection, it became clear what the orange bag was. It was a sleeping bag. Shinya looked up at me.

"We can't just leave her here, right?" he said. "I got permission from Iria and everything. I've decided to bury her on the mountain

out back. It's not like Iria's going to call the police, and this is all her property anyway. Burying Kanami is all I can do now."

"We'll help you," I said.

He tried to say something, but perhaps realizing the benefit of having two extra people with him, he thought better of it.

Together we lifted up Kanami's body and silently stuffed it into the sleeping bag. It goes without saying, but her flesh was completely devoid of warmth.

"Shinya, do you have something to dig with?"

"They're supposed to have left out a big shovel by the entrance. Kunagisa, maybe you can carry it for us? Hm? Say, is that a digital camera?"

"Yup." Kunagisa nodded. "We have to keep a record of the crime scene for when the Master Detective shows up. It's not like corpses can assert a right not to be photographed."

That was probably the worst way she could've phrased it, but Shinya responded with a nod and a wry smile. "Shall we go, then?"

"Um, Shinya? About this painting…"

"Hmm? Ah. Kanami's painting. It's fantastic, isn't it? It's the last painting she ever did, but she meant to give it to you, so please take it."

"Is it okay?"

"I want to honor her last wishes."

Last wishes.

Yes, she died. Without having accomplished a thing…

"Get her feet, will you? I'll carry the head, and□"

Shinya cut himself off, most likely realizing there was no head to

carry. Keeping my mouth shut, I picked up the legs.

Shinya no doubt wished he could bury the head with the body, but its whereabouts remained unknown. Either the killer was hiding it somewhere, or it had already been tossed into the woods or thrown into the sea, like Kunagisa said.

Holding on to the legs, it occurred to me how heavy corpses are. When people are unconscious and aren't supporting themselves, they're heavier than you'd expect. It probably wasn't impossible for a single person to carry, but two people were definitely better.

From that point on, none of us spoke. In silence we lifted her body and left the mansion; in silence we headed for the mountain in the back; and in silence we dug a hole.

The sleeping bag that held her body was such a cheap-looking orange excuse for a coffin, I couldn't help but find it comical. Maybe, I thought, the death of a human being is comical, and nothing more.

People die. That was something I knew all too well, to a nauseating degree, and Kunagisa did, too. And Shinya, being a full-fledged adult, had no doubt been touched by death in the past as well.

That's probably why we were all so quiet.

Finally, Shinya spoke.

"You two can go back now. I'm going to stay here a little longer."

I wanted to say something, but didn't. Pulling on Kunagisa's hand, I left without a word. Maybe Shinya was going to cry. Maybe he wasn't. Either way, we no longer had a reason to linger.

After all, we were only strangers.

"I wonder if it was okay to just go ahead and bury her," Kunagisa mused rather belatedly.

"I think so. Shinya seems to be the only thing she had resembling a loved one, and that's what he wanted to do. And we couldn't just

leave her lying in the atelier all week."

"True. True, but…"

"Say, Tomo. How big a crime do you suppose it is to dispose of a corpse?"

"You'd probably get less than a three-year sentence. It would probably be a suspended sentence, too. But you and I are both underage anyway, so no worries. No matter what happens, we can get off with a little money."

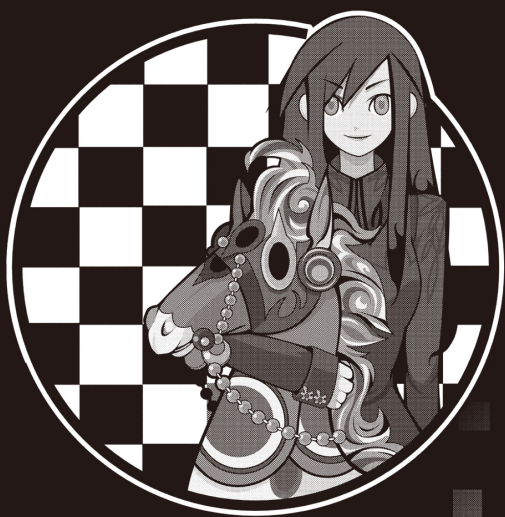
What a tasteless conversation.

Not that I was looking for a tasteful one.

"Such nonsense…" I muttered.

Kunagisa gave me a funny look.

FOURTH DAY (2)
The Tragedy of 0.14



AKANE SONOYAMA
Genius of the Seven Fools

0

What exactly were you trying to do?

1

Lunch was prepared by Hikari. Yayoi had complained of being under the weather and was resting in her room. Indeed, she did seem pretty pale when we passed her in the hall.

“It’s nothing like what Yayoi makes us, but please enjoy,” Hikari said with a shy smile before leaving the dining room. That left only me and Kunagisa…and Maki. She was having lunch, too. I did my best to ignore her as I crammed Hikari’s cooking down my throat. Kunagisa, who didn’t seem to be hungry and had just tagged along, looked around restlessly.

“Hey, boy-o.” As expected, Maki was going to harass me. “Looks like you’ve been having some fun, eh, eh, eh?”

“So you meant this, Maki.”

“Hmm? What are you talking about?”

“Things getting worse before they get better. Isn’t that what you said at dinner yesterday? What a lovely precognition that was.”

“I sense a bit of sarcasm there, but I’ll go ahead and take that as a compliment.”

“If you knew this was going to happen, couldn’t you have prevented it?”

“Uh-uh. All I can do is watch and listen. I think you’re misunderstanding me. Psychic abilities aren’t such a great convenience. I told you before, didn’t I? It’s like watching TV. Can you alter the contents of a TV show?”

She gave a mocking smile and ferried food into her mouth.

Something about her resembled Kunagisa, I thought. So emotionally immature, yet at the same time enlightened. In the aftermath of Kanami’s murder, she seemed completely unfazed. In fact, it didn’t seem like anything could ever “faze” her.

“Then please inform us, what’s going to happen next?”

“Sure. If you pay me.”

Suddenly she looked furious, and without another word, she got up and stormed out of the dining room. Why was she so mad?

“That was insensitive of you, Iichan.”

“What was?”

“Forget it. If you’re done eating, let’s go back to my room. We’ve got things to do.”

“Yeah, okay.”

Maki must just have been a moody person. I optimistically decided to assume that was the case and give it no further thought. I didn’t know what darkness lurked in the heart of someone who knew everything.

We returned to Kunagisa’s room. First we unloaded the digital photos onto her PC with a USB cord. Then she switched on the workstation and inserted a floppy disk.

“What’s on the disk?” I asked.

“Tools. My original creations, of course. It’s set up so that they only run on this workstation, so even if I lose the CD it’s okay. Now let’s get to the bottom of this.”

To put it plainly, what Kunagisa was about to do was illegal.

But I guess you could also call it “research.”

Including Kanami, there were twelve people. Excluding Kunagisa and me, there were ten. As planned, Kunagisa was going to run a background check on them and find out who knew whom.

Kanami had been murdered. There must have been a reason for that. Of course, there are murders that occur for no apparent reason, but the other type is overwhelmingly, absolutely, and depressingly more common. Supposedly everyone here had met for the first time on the island, but what if that wasn’t the case? The possibility was there, and just thinking about it wouldn’t do much good.

And thus it was time for Tomo Kunagisa, leader of the Team that had thrown the cyberworld into total chaos last century, to act.

“So what now?”

“First I’m gonna access the hi-spec machine I’ve got back home. This workstation doesn’t have the power we need.”

“Even with ‘tera’?”

“This has nothing to do with capacity. Iichan, you really don’t know anything, do you?”

“Quit saying that. I might not know as much as you, but I do know some things. I took an electronics class back in Houston, at least.”

“Really? Sounds like a lie to me. Once, when I asked you to copy a disk for me, you said, ‘Sure,’ and headed for a convenience store that had a Xerox machine.”

“That was before I went to Houston.” Curse that memory of hers.

“Well, whatever. That’s Iichan for ya,” she said. “Anyway, from there I’m gonna use about ten UG servers as a platform and contact Chee.”

“Chee? Never heard that name before.”

But I could guess it was a member of the Team. I asked if it was, and she nodded.

“Chee was mainly in charge of ‘seeking.’ There’s nothing in the Milky Way Galaxy that he can’t track down.”

The Milky Way Galaxy, huh? This was a freakish pack of talented people indeed.

“He’s got a terrible personality, but he’s a good guy.”

“He’s not the one who made that operating system, is he? That was Acchan, right? So what’s this Chee doing nowadays?”

“He’s in prison. He got a 150-year sentence. Oh, plus eight years□158 years. He kept hacking on his own even after the Team disbanded… He tried to crack the G8 database, but yeah, that did get him caught. He made it pretty far, but he got stuck at the eighty-seventh line of defense. Hehe, if you get too good at something, it’s always the easy stuff that gets you in the end.”

“You sure know a lot about it.”

“Yup. I was the one who designed that line of defense.”

“…”

“I had heard a rumor that Chee was after top-secret UN information. I couldn’t just let the situation be, so I contacted a few friends and we set up a defense. Even then it was a close call, which is a testament to his skill.”

“And he got thrown in prison? You really think he’ll help us? In fact, how is he going to from prison? They don’t have the Internet in there, do they?”

“There’s always an exception to the rule, y’know. And Chee happens to be pretty exceptional. He’ll definitely help out. Chee’s not the type to sweat the small stuff.”

She continued typing away even while she talked. I already had no idea what she was doing.

“Why do you call him ‘Chee’?”

“His net handle is Cheetah.”

“Kind of an obvious handle, huh?”

“Yeah, well, he’s a fast runner, too. He says he’s rammed a car before.”

“While driving, I’m sure.”

“No, while running. I bet he was the first person in Japan to pay damages for hitting a car while on foot.”

How’s that for eccentric?

Was this like attracting like? Or did Tomo simply like them?

“Don’t ever introduce us,” I said. He sounded like the kind of person I’d rather quietly observe from a distance.

Kunagisa nodded. “You got it. We all have rules, after all. We never introduce friends to each other no matter what. Cuz friends aren’t just information… I don’t want you introducing me to anyone, either, Iichan.”

“Sure. So I guess I’ll just leave all this up to you then? If you’re going to be contacting that guy, I probably shouldn’t be hanging around, huh? I’ve got a few places to go, too.”

“Peace out,” Kunagisa saluted.

With that, I left her room and made my way down the spiral staircase. There I paused for a deep breath, and began down the hallway. I was on my way to Iria’s room. Hikari had given me

directions earlier, so I didn't get lost.

Even in a mansion like this, where everything was of the finest quality, the door to her room was of exceptional craftsmanship. I doubted whether the sound of my knocking would even reach the other side of such a chunky door. Nonetheless, after giving it a try, the wave of sound did somehow appear to reach the inside, and my knock was answered with a "Come in."

I opened the door and went inside. The room was probably twice the size of Kunagisa's. It wasn't straight out of a movie, I was practically in a movie. I felt like a fairy tale character visiting a palace.

The words receive an audience came to mind.

It was head maid Rei who sat on a sofa, while Iria stood beside her. They must've been in the middle of a conversation.

Iria tilted her head at me. "Is something the matter? Um…" She looked perplexed. It seemed she had forgotten my name. No, I actually hadn't given my name once since coming to this mansion.

"I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Certainly. Please take a seat there."

I was thrown off by her cooperativeness. As instructed, I sat myself on a sofa that was even swankier than the one in Kunagisa's room. It was like sitting on air.

"I didn't get much sleep last night. I was about to go to bed, so please keep it short." She slowly began removing her dress as she spoke, presumably to change into her sleepwear. Rei nearly rose to her feet, but perhaps thinking twice about finding issue with her mistress's actions, ultimately said nothing.

Seriously, this was about what you'd expect from a woman of pedigree. The gaze of a mere plebeian meant nothing to her. What nonsense.

"Iria, why won't you call the police?"

My question brought her to a halt. “I believe I’ve already explained that. If we call the police now, they’ll treat Sonoyama like a criminal.”

“But isn’t that what we’re doing already? We’ve already locked her up. And aren’t we committing crimes here?”

“Sheltering a criminal, imprisonment, and…disposing of a corpse?” She continued changing. “What’s wrong with that? Murder, theft—those are crimes. And Sonoyama isn’t being imprisoned, really. She gave consent. Besides, aren’t you the one who suggested it in the first place?”

Indeed, I was.

There was nothing I could say to that.

Iria continued. “The people gathered here are the VIPs of the world. I refuse to allow them to become victims of the boorish authority of a state. Why call for excess meddling? Nobody wants that. Plus”—she smiled—“no matter who did it, I don’t intend on subjecting anyone here to the law. Even if it means exercising the full power of the Akagami Foundation, I’ll be protecting them.”

“Why?”

“Because geniuses are above the law.”

Of that, she sounded totally certain. It left nowhere for me to stand. If Shinya or I were the criminal, on the contrary, it sounded like she wouldn’t protect us.

What a feeling.

What a crappy, crappy feeling.

“How do you define the word genius?” Iria suddenly asked.

After a moment’s thought I answered, “Well, doesn’t Kretschmer ascribe it to people who’re ‘able to arouse permanently, and in the highest degree, a positive, grounded feeling of worth and value in a wide group of human beings’?”

“I asked for your opinion.”

Seriously, what a crappy feeling.

But really, she was right. After another moment’s thought, I answered once again.

“Someone who’s ‘far away.’ ”

“Yes,” Iria said. “That answer is spot-on.”

“I get the feeling there’s some other reason you won’t call the police…”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m just saying. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Well then, are we done here? I want to go to bed.”

What a waste of time. It was like we were having a debate with a foregone conclusion.

“Sorry I bothered you,” I said and rose from the sofa.

Rei stood up with me. “I’ll see you out.”

“You don’t have to do that, Rei,” Iria commanded.

“It’s okay, it’s my job… Please excuse me, miss.”

Rei and I left the room together. It felt rather like I had been given the brush-off, but well, I had expected as much for now. It would take more than a modest effort to convince someone like Iria.

“Please don’t mind her views,” Rei said in a subdued tone on the way out. “Being considerate isn’t her forte.”

“…Okay.”

Come to think of it, this was the first time I had spoken with Rei like this.

“I don’t really mind anyway.”

“She’s really so fond of Aikawa, you see. That’s why she doesn’t want to call the police.”

“Aikawa? Oh, this person coming in six days.”

“For her, this is sort of a welcoming present. You see, Aikawa has a knack for these cases, and, well, it’s no coincidence that my mistress uses the term detective.”

Interesting. So this whole murder fiasco was sort of a present for Aikawa. If that was the truth, he had to be one hell of a guy.

No.

To put it plainly, maybe this whole incident was just Iria’s way of killing time. Island-exiled heiress to the Akagami Foundation. She certainly had no lack of money or time. And she had already gathered all these geniuses here for her amusement. Could it be that this murder was just some…special event?

I shook my head. I was overthinking it. There aren’t actual people like that. People like that couldn’t exist in this world.

“Well, please excuse me now.”

Rei bowed to me in front of Kunagisa’s room and went back the way she’d come. After talking, she had turned out to be an unexpectedly nice person, so I was a bit surprised. Hikari had made her out to be so strict…

Thinking about that made me feel a little funny as I opened the door. Inside were Kunagisa, face-to-face with her computer rack, and one more person… Ah, the peerless fortune-teller. Why the hell?

Maki was smoking, but once I entered, she put out the cigarette with her own index finger. She rose from the sofa and approached to pass me without a word. But as if changing her mind midway, she butted her head into my chest, pushed me out into the hallway with her, and shut the door behind her.

I eyed her suspiciously.

“Heh, heh, heh,” she laughed childishly. But that’s all she did, without even attempting to speak.

“In a better mood now?”

“It’s not just my mood that’s improved. Heheh. You’re so careless. Or maybe just rash?”

“What brought this on?”

“Do you have a favorite author?”

This conversation was all over the place. “No.”

“How about celebrity?”

“No.”

“You’re so boring. Fine. Let’s say there’s somebody who admires a genius. But there are three patterns to that. There are those who think, ‘I love this person, I admire him, I respect him, I want to be just like him.’ Pure, right? The second type is similar to the first, but they separate themselves completely from the object of their admiration and even hold that person’s life above their own. Finally, the third type thinks that by taking an interest in this wonderful person, they can absorb some of that wonderfulness and increase their own worth in turn. A despicable, rotten-minded breed that hangs on others. Now which one of those three categories do you belong to?”

“The second, I suppose.”

“Correct. And warped as it may be, even I can’t help but be moved by your loyalty to Kunagisa,” Maki conceded with a grin. “But with that said, aren’t you being awfully careless? Leaving her all alone in her room like that? What if I was the killer?”

“…”

“If you really, truly want to take care of something, you shouldn’t

let it leave your sight even for a second. Keep that in mind, boy."

Patt patt.

She smacked me twice on the shoulder and disappeared, singing some tune.

I was left alone in the hallway.

"Hah…"

Dammit.

I cursed to myself, opened the door, and entered.

2

With the usual rules apparently still in effect, come dinnertime almost everyone was gathered around the table.

Almost.

Naturally Kanami wasn't around, and Akane was absent as well. Additionally missing were Akari and Teruko. Apparently they had crossed to the mainland. The reason for this was that they needed to contact our dear detective, "Aikawa."

"Couldn't you just call or e-mail him?" I asked.

"We can't," Hikari said. "Aikawa is famously difficult to reach. It's a busy life, I guess, and I believe there's something going on in Aichi prefecture right now. So Akari and Teruko won't be back until tomorrow."

"Busy life, huh? What is this person, anyway, profession-wise?"

"A contractor."

What the heck?

I wasn't entirely familiar with that kind of lingo.

This night's dinner was Chinese food. According to Yayoi Sashirono, master of flavors, Chinese was the quickest and easiest food to make. Of course, that was from her perspective, so it probably wouldn't serve as reference for me in my own cooking anytime soon.

"By the way, Kunagisa," Iria said just as dinner was ending. "I hear you were conducting some covert ops this afternoon. Did you figure anything out? I thought your specialty was machines, but you can conduct these types of investigations as well?"

“I do all sorts of stuff,” Kunagisa said with sweet-and-sour pork crammed into her mouth. “No need to tie myself down with specialties and such.”

That sounded familiar.

Ah…right. They were Kanami’s words. The words of a style-free painter.

Regardless of your strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, there’s no need to specialize. This was a fundamental teaching at the ER program as well. Yet in a world that categorizes everything, that was no easy teaching to adhere to. It began and ended with the likes of Tomo Kunagisa, Kanami Ibuki, and Akane Sonoyama.

For me, it was an impossibility.

“So, did you figure anything out? About how the culprit entered the room or who it may have been?”

It sounded more like she didn’t want Kunagisa to figure anything out. I recalled what Rei had said earlier. If the case were solved before Aikawa got here, it would be something of a killjoy for Iria.

“I know it all. I know so much, I don’t know which to choose.”

Nobody seemed to understand what Kunagisa was talking about. Instead they eyed her skeptically and said nothing.

“Himena,” Iria switched the conversation from the techie to the psychic. “Since coming here you’ve put all your effort into harassing the other guests, and have yet to do any fortune-telling. So how about it? Don’t you think it’s time to tell us what’s going to happen next?”

“It’ll cost you.”

Maki was living here for free, and receiving a stipend, and she still had the nerve to demand a fee? What a moneygrubbing atrocity of a human being. I had never met a person like her before. She was like the devil.

“You’re one to talk.”

She was glaring at me.

I wasn’t talking, dammit.

“Well, it sounds the same to me,” she pointed out. “And I use my abilities to make a profit. I’m not so young that I can stay motivated by morality and humanity alone. Especially in terms of emotional age.”

I understood what she was saying. But she must have already had enough ten-thousand-yen bills to fill ten Tokyo Domes, so what more did she want? It wouldn’t hurt for her to tell fortunes for free every once in a while.

“Who gave you the right to think that?” she spat, and snapped her attention back to Iria.

“Of course I’ll pay for it.” Iria put her hands together. “Please, I’m asking you.”

“It ends soon.”

Maki spoke without even changing her tone of voice. Everybody waited for her to continue, but she was already fully invested in her twice-cooked pork. It looked like that was all she had to say.

“Is that all?” Iria asked, evidently somewhat surprised. “I have to say, that was a little, um…”

“That was charity. Since a certain somebody here has so many complaints about me, I thought I’d be a little generous. Don’t worry about it. It has no bearing on the main storyline, so to speak.”

“…”

Maki Himena.

Just what is it like to know everything and stay silent about it? For someone like me who knows nothing, it was impossible to even imagine. In that sense, Maki was, for me, the biggest mystery on

this whole island. So much so that the mystery of a decapitated corpse and a room locked by a river of paint was all blotted out.

After that, Maki said nothing more, and so the fourth night's dinner ended without any significant developments. She and Kunagisa made a few bizarre comments as usual, and that was it.

Yet there was one thing that bothered me. Shinya and Yayoi hadn't said a single word the entire time, and they didn't even appear to be listening to anyone else's conversation. They just sat there putting food in their mouths, just because it was there. It wasn't so remarkable, but there was definitely something unnatural about the two of them. It was one thing for Shinya, who had lost Kanami, to be like that, but what was Yayoi's issue? Granted, she had complained of feeling "under the weather" earlier…

3

Just past nine o'clock p.m.

I was alone in Kunagisa's room, viewing the digital camera data on the one PC that looked like I might just barely be able to operate it. It had no mouse, making it difficult to control, but it wasn't completely over my head.

Kanami's corpse. A shot from the chest up as well as a full-body shot. A shot of the severed neck and a shot of the river of paint. In the middle of the river floated a coat. The paint having dried and hardened, we couldn't remove it. I suppose we could have forced the coat out, but it was already ruined with paint, so there was no point.

And finally…

The picture I had modeled for, Kanami's final work.

That unnaturalness I felt upon first seeing the canvas during our crime scene investigation.

The disconnect.

The alien vibe.

It was just a gut feeling, but…

"Ah, I get it," I muttered to myself.

Of course. Now that I saw it, it was so simple. The bigger mystery was why it had taken me so long to notice. It was such an obvious picture flaw.

"Hmm…"

But this just raised further questions.

How could something like this happen? There was no reason something like that should happen. How could an artist of Kanami's caliber make such a simple error?

As I thought about it, somebody knocked on the door.

I let out a sigh.

It had to be Maki, here to harass me again. I rose from my seat, almost looking forward to it by now. But when I opened the door, it was actually Hikari. Thrown into confusion by how far off my guess had been, I stared at her for two or three seconds with no brain functionality.

"Ah, hey, Hikari," somehow I managed to string the words together. "Uh, please, come in."

"Sorry to bother you." With a polite bow, she entered the room. She glanced around it for a moment and then asked me, "Um, where might I find Tomo?"

"Oh, Kunagisa? I tied her up and tossed her in the tub just a minute ago."

"Huh?"

"She's like a cat. She hates taking baths. Her hair is actually supposed to be a much lighter blue… She never washes it so it gets all dark like that. She's no good at slipping out of bonds, and once she gets wet she just kind of gives up, so she could be in there for a while."

"Oh… True, she's kind of like a Russian Blue." Though Hikari wore an expression of dawned enlightenment, what she said didn't make any sense. Seriously, I didn't know what she was talking about. Better to just ignore it.

"Um, so anyway, if you need to talk to her, I'm sorry but you're probably going to have to wait a□" Then a thought occurred to me. Maybe this was a good opportunity. "Say, Hikari, are you free right

now?”

“Hmm? Sure. I’ve finished all my work for the day, anyway.”

“Then would you mind staying here for a while? It might be dangerous for me to leave Kunagisa alone,” I said, recalling Maki’s lecture this afternoon. “It should be fine now that we’ve made it hard for the killer to do anything, but just in case. Do you mind?”

“No, it’s okay, I guess,” she said, though she wore a troubled expression. “Of course I don’t mind, but is it really okay? I mean… to trust me?”

“No one would attack both of you at the same time.”

“No, I mean, you don’t think you’re leaving her vulnerable?”

Oh, that.

“It’s okay,” I nodded. “I wouldn’t know about, say, Maki, but I trust you.”

With that, I shut the door and headed down the hall, then descended the stairs to the first floor.

“I trust you…” I muttered, self-mockingly.

Since when was I the type to make such grandiose claims? Didn’t sound like me.

Question: What is trust?

Answer: Not minding if you’re betrayed. Not regretting if you’re betrayed.

“Either way, it’s nonsense…”

I arrived at my destination, once my own room, now Akane Sonoyama’s prison.

“It’s me,” I said, knocking lightly.

“Oh, you,” came her reply after a moment. She sounded

surprisingly calm. “What’s up? Should you be away from Kunagisa? It doesn’t seem like you.”

“Well, I had my own hesitations, but…I wanted to apologize to you.”

“Why should you apologize?” came her reply from the other side of the door, slightly laced with crankiness. “Weren’t you the one who stood up for me? Coming here and apologizing is like saying I’m too much of a thickheaded imbecile to even understand that. If anything, I should be thanking you.”

“…”

“I should’ve suggested this in the first place, but that probably wouldn’t have gone over so well, so I was thankful when you brought it up. I should express my gratitude right now.” She paused for a moment. “Thank you.”

“…You’re welcome.”

She hadn’t risen to the ranks of the Seven Fools for nothin’. That wasn’t the kind of forgiving place where you could get by with just a little studying and a sharp wit.

“By the way, when Hikari brought my dinner, she mentioned you guys have been snooping around a bit. You and Kunagisa. Mind if I ask how it was?”

“Well, I still don’t know who the killer is.”

“You still don’t know, huh? Heh, should I be reading into that? Heh heh, I like your style. Okay, sure. Let me ask a different question. Got any theories on the locked room?”

“Hm, how about you?”

“I think it’s a case of the post hoc fallacy.”

“Is that English?”

“Latin. I think it’s sort of like ‘you reap what you sow.’”

Ah…

I sighed.

In that case, she must have already figured out the trick behind the locked room. She had solved the mystery, and yet was staying here to maintain the state of equilibrium. She was really an amazing woman, I thought.

Heheh, she laughed.

“Until Iria’s dear…‘Aikawa,’ was it? Until that person arrives, it’s probably best that I stay in here. It’s no real problem for me, anyway. I used to sit in a cramped room and read all the time when I was young. And that room was way smaller than this.”

“Do you know who the killer is?”

“That, I don’t. It’s no lie, I mean it. That kind of thing isn’t my specialty, and although I do read the occasional mystery novel, it’s only for recreation. Say, do you ever read Mushanokoji?”

The subject had changed without so much as a segue. Was Mushanokoji even a mystery novel author? “I’ve only pecked at his selected works,” I answered with a slightly confused look on my face.

“Then you must know the story ‘Shinri-sensei.’” I did. “I read the title as ‘Mari-sensei’ at first and was incensed that the woman was so horribly full of herself… Not that I can talk. But do you remember, how at the beginning, Truth-sensei discusses ‘the reason killing isn’t okay’?”

“Yeah, he’s like, ‘Is there ever a time when you wouldn’t mind being killed? If you can think of a condition under which you wouldn’t mind being killed, please let me know. If you don’t like the thought of being killed under any circumstance, then you have no right to kill another,’ right?” Even with a memory as bad as mine, this much had stuck with me.

“Correct,” Akane said. “Now let me ask you the same question. Under what condition would you feel it’s okay to be killed?”

“There isn’t one.”

“But what if, for example, you had to choose between your life and Kunagisa’s?”

“I don’t want to think about it.”

“Right?” Akane laughed lightheartedly. “In the end, that is what you are. You hate making decisions, don’t you? You dislike the act of ‘deciding’ in and of itself. Yesterday, Himena was saying similar things about you, but she nailed it, didn’t she? You just go with the flow. You hate competition, and you hate making things clear-cut. You have to keep things ambiguous.”

“I won’t argue with that.”

“You won’t argue, but you won’t agree. You accepted my shogi challenge because you knew you would definitely lose. You wouldn’t accept a challenge or compete otherwise.”

I didn’t hate losing, I hated competing.

I was thoroughly put off by the idea of vying with others over something.

I hated arguing as well, so I never made friends.

“Do you dislike other people?” asked Akane.

“Not particularly.”

“Then do you like them?”

“Certainly not.”

“That’s right. The foundation of your values rests on the idea that people are meant to live solitary lives. That’s your view, yes? Or rather your will. That’s the absolute principle around which you’re constructed. You try your best not to get involved and not to cause trouble or pain for anyone. Of course you can share happiness and good times with others, but you don’t see why you should suffer pain and sorrow just to maintain those relationships, isn’t that

right?”

I always thought couples who spend all their time fighting and stay together all the same were just idiotic.

Why don’t they get along?

Couldn’t they just do that much?

Why couldn’t they?

“Since when were you such a psychologist, Akane?”

“Sorry, but I’m a grand unifying unitary scholar. Such distinctions are meaningless to me. Heheh. You must really, truly enjoy being alone.”

“Well, after all, I’m my oldest friend.”

“True enough. That’s the case for everyone, including me… So how about Kunagisa? Altogether, you’ve spent less than a year with her, right?”

“…”

“Do you like her?”

It was a straight question.

I had been asked the same one five years ago. That time it was her older brother who asked.

However the answer remained the same.

“Not especially, no.”

My voice came out so despairingly cold that I almost wondered if it was really mine.

Why? Why was I□

Like this.

“Hmm, is that so?” She sounded a little surprised. “Because she likes you, you know. That much is certain.”

“Yeah, I know. She’s told me more than a few times.”

“I don’t particularly like this kind of discussion, but have you ever wondered why the world is full of couples, why so many people get together?”

“…”

“I mean isn’t it strange? It would be too convenient for the person you like to ever like you back. Life isn’t a girls’ comic book. But sure enough, in reality, you take a group of a hundred people, a whole lot of them are going to find love. Why do you think that is?”

“I have no idea. I’ve never thought about it. Isn’t it just coincidence? Like the Law of Great Numbers of something?”

“I don’t think so. A coincidence like that is unfeasible. This is the conclusion I’ve reached: it’s because it feels good to be loved. Being loved by another person is enough to make you happy and make you love that person in return,” Akane declared.

I could see her clever little smile even through the door. This was becoming more than I could bear much longer. I felt like I was about to be crushed to death.

“So what are you getting at?”

“Oh, no, no… I was just wondering why you hadn’t fallen for Kunagisa… You know how it is for us scholars. If we can’t figure something out, it’ll bother us to no end.”

“She likes everyone. Seriously, everyone. It’s not like she wants me with her in particular,” I weaved a response.

“So that’s it,” Akane said. “You don’t want to be liked by her. You want to be chosen by her. As her one and only.”

I…couldn’t argue with that.

“Hmm, but why her? That’s what I can’t figure out. It seems like there must be some obvious reason, but I don’t get it. There have to be unpleasant aspects to hanging out with her. In fact, one would think you’d be repulsed by such an easy woman.”

An easy woman?

Who?

“You mean easygoing.”

“Right. Anyway, someone with your personality shouldn’t be able to tolerate a ‘superior but juvenile’ presence. Plus, you’re a man.”

“It’s fun being with her. Or well…” I chose my words carefully. “Rather, it’s fun being by her side.”

My favorite place in the world was by Tomo Kunagisa.

I had returned to Japan for that very reason.

“Hm,” Akane said. “You’re a little masochistic, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, basically. I got bullied in elementary school, see.”

“You were bullied? No, I doubt it. I think you were blackballed. There’s a difference between the two. Children abuse weaklings and liars. They blackball the heterodox. But I know how you feel. When I was in high school, I felt like I was surrounded by aliens. When we took exams, nobody shot for a perfect grade, they shot for the average. If we ran a marathon, they would say, ‘Hey, let’s all run together!’ Tests where no answer is outright wrong. It’s egalitarian, for better or for worse. No wonder they’re teaching that pi equals three. Indeed, each of the other Seven Fools claims to have experienced similar feelings. It’s the tragedy of 0.14. When you’re thoroughly egalitarian, the outliers who are excluded even then get to taste true isolation. Genius comes of heterodoxy. But not all outcasts are geniuses.”

“You mean it’s a necessary but not a sufficient condition? Well, I’m sure no genius.”

“Maybe not, but I think you at least know the difference between advice and an order, so let me give you some friendly advice: if you want Kunagisa to choose you, I recommend you just take her. If you do that, you’ll be the only one for her. She won’t resist, that much is for sure. Regardless of how introverted, morose, or warped you may be, no matter how gloomy a stranger you are to adolescence and rebellious phases, I’m sure you at least have the balls to do that.”

“I don’t.”

“You’re a real mallard, huh?”

A what? Some sort of lame duck?

“Um, I’m not even sure this time, but you think I’m a coward?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Heheheh, I like you, y’know? It’s too bad you aren’t a woman.”

Why the hell?

I didn’t know what she was trying to say anymore. No, that’s wrong. It was simply becoming too painful to keep myself together any longer.

If this went on any longer, any longer at all□

“Well, it’s okay,” Akane said. “I’m sure everything will become clear soon enough. Time always gives things some clarity. Say, by the way, have you ever heard the theory that in zero-sum games like shogi and chess there’s always a best move to make?”

“Is this game theory? Like the Prisoners’ Dilemma?”

“Yeah, that. The movement of the shogi pieces is mathematically limited, so there is always a ‘best’ move. If you take that to an extreme, you can say the match is decided after the very first move. Of course, this assumes that both opponents are perfect players. So how about the killer in our case? How about this ‘Aikawa’ who’ll play opposite? Isn’t it a fascinating notion? Still, this mystery feels more like a maze than a shogi board.”

“A labyrinth, huh? But mazes are simple. If you just stick your hand on one wall, you’ll eventually find the way out. It just takes time.”

“You’re talking about a simple maze. I think this case is more like a multiconnected labyrinth. There’s a surefire strategy even for such mazes, but it’s kind of hard to explain. If you have a chance, try looking it up. But don’t you ever want to play a game with no surefire strategy?”

A game with no surefire strategy.

A sure way to win…

Well□so did this case have one?

Anxiety. Like standing on shaky legs. I felt sick.

“If you think about it,” she continued.

This sickening conversation. Even though it was sickening.

“Um, Akane,” I said, at last unable to contain myself. “I’d like to keep talking like this…but I’ve left someone waiting in my room so…” I forced my words together into a sentence. I fought the urge to throw up. “I think I’d better get back.”

“Oh, okay. Sorry about that,” she acquiesced readily despite my fears. “Anyway, please come again. You sure help pass the time.”

“Thanks. Well, see you later…”

With that, I began to leave, but there was something that still bothered me. I knocked once again.

“Um, about your first question.”

“Hmm? What’s up?”

“Do you have them? Moments where you wouldn’t mind being killed?”

“Moments? Not mere moments□always.” It was a clear answer. “I’ll

die when my time is up. Regardless of where or how I die, or who kills me for what reason, you won't hear a complaint out of me."

And with that I returned to Kunagisa's room, never thinking for a second that this would be my final interaction with Akane Sonoyama, the leading Japanese woman scholar of her generation, that genius of geniuses of the highest order, of the Seven Fools, of the Comprehensive Research Center ER3.

4

“Iichan, you’re back.”

Kunagisa sat on her bed, her body wrapped in a pure white bathrobe. Hikari was on the sofa. Seeing that I had returned, she breathed a sigh of relief. Trying to handle a conversation with a bath-fresh, spunky Kunagisa was no task for an amateur, so I knew how Hikari felt.

“Iichan, look, I washed my hair. Compliment me, compliment me.”

“It’s cute.”

Her hair had turned a pretty, cobalt blue, the original Kunagisa color. “It’s not easy bearing recessive genes,” she’d told me once.

“Are you gonna take a bath, too, Iichan? You might come up with a good idea in there, y’know, like Archimedes. And then run around the mansion naked, just like him.”

“That would be…a problem,” Hikari said in all seriousness.

It was like she thought I really might. Gee, what had I done to impart such an oddball impression?

“But Archimedes really was a strange person, wasn’t he?” the maid added thoughtfully, tilting her head. “Are all geniuses like that?”

Was she picturing someone else at the mansion? It felt like it could have been anyone or no one.

“Nudity wasn’t so uncommon in those days, Hikari,” I explained to her. “I don’t think he was being a weirdo.”

“Yep, you’re terribly learned, Iichan.”

“Terribly is about right. So, Hikari, what was it you needed?”

“Oh, yes. My mistress sent me to see what’s up with Tomo and you.”

She sure was an honest person. I told her there was no point if she went and told us that’s what she was doing. She laughed embarrassedly.

“I know. Akari’s really better at this kind of thing, but she’ll be staying on the mainland tonight. She won’t be back until tomorrow morning.”

“She went to call on that detective, right?” I was a little bit interested, so I went ahead and asked. “So, what’s this person like, anyway? Judging from the way you spoke, it sounds like you’ve met before. Are you well acquainted?”

“Yes, I suppose so. Aikawa came to our rescue in the past. There was an incident, and, well…” Hikari vaguely trailed off. It didn’t seem like a secret just a matter she wasn’t eager to discuss.

“Hmm, an incident, huh? On this island?”

“Yes. This was right after my mistress had been disowned, and before it had become this sort of salon… So we called Aikawa here, and, well, the case was solved almost immediately,” Hikari divulged with some feeling. “Aikawa has kind of a violent temper, you see an emotional sarcast, angry at the world, solving cases through sheer rage…”

“Huh.”

Hikari seemed to be carefully choosing her words as she spoke, but not very effectively. I couldn’t put together a concrete picture of this guy at all.

“So Aikawa has a short fuse?”

“Well, it’s more like a perpetual state of rage. Even if you catch a glimpse of a smile, there’s always this sort of hostility hanging in the air, and… I’m sorry, it’s kind of hard to describe. Anyway, it’s

like Aikawa has a grudge against the whole world."

"I see," I said, even though I didn't. "But all the detectives I've ever read about in mystery novels are all so cool and reserved. They're always saying stuff like 'Didn't you realize that?' You could replace eighty percent of their dialogue with 'What are you, stupid?' and it would still make sense. But based on what you're saying, Aikawa sounds like some sort of hotheaded defender of justice with zero tolerance for criminals."

"Oh, well, it's not like that. It's not just zero tolerance for criminals, it's zero tolerance for the entire world. You know, always saying things like 'This world, and humaniy, could be so much better! Why are you bastards all slacking?'"

He really was hotheaded, a rare type of person these days and such a splendid contrast to me, a "nonsense" user, of the vagueness persuasion.

"But despite all the anger and grouchiness, it just doesn't do any good to get frustrated by people who're lazy even about their own worth, so just wear a sardonic smile□Aikawa was like that, quite unlike you and Tomo, to say the least."

Hikari sounded sort of gleeful in describing this detective. Like she was boasting about a close friend or something. Or more like a hero. It was just like when Iria had described him.

"Is that right? Well, that's probably the better way to be," I said, to keep the conversation going. "Do you think Aikawa is reliable?"

"Yes, for sure."

"That's a relief. Even if we can't figure out the mystery in the next six days, we have a backup savior."

"You sound awfully unsure of yourself."

"I'm cautious. Or maybe I'm a coward. Or rather, I don't really care."

"You don't care?" She gave me a confused look. "You know, this

may be strange coming from me, but why is everyone able to stay so calm in a situation like this?"

"Well, that's a fairly deep question."

"Sorry. But you know, it's like, even though someone was killed, everyone is so…"

"Maybe they're just used to it?"

At least, that was pretty much how it was for me.

I didn't really know the difference between "used to" and "numb," though.

"Yep, but Shinya and Yayoi seem to be reacting in a more or less appropriate way," Kunagisa said.

"That's right, but hey, Hikari, you and your sisters seem pretty calm, too. What about that?"

"Well, we've been trained to maintain composure…"

She sounded a little sad about it. Her twenty-seven years of living probably hadn't been much of a cakewalk.

"Oh, right," she said, breaking the awkward pause with a snap of her fingers. "My mistress told me to make sure I ask you this. About the locked-room trick. Earlier you said something about understanding so much that you don't understand, right? My mistress believes that Tomo must have figured it out."

About that space enclosed by a river of paint.

Hmm… That young heiress may not have been worldly, but she was quite sharp.

"Nothing to brag about, really," I said. "Any mystery novel fan would be able to solve it easily. But you know, when you encounter such a trick in real life, it proves to be pretty perplexing. I guess the answers get a little drowned out by the smell of blood, the taste of death."

“Hahaha, Iichan, you sound like an idiot using such weird turns of phrase.”

Kunagisa was laughing. An innocent, vulnerable, childlike laugh.

…

It made my head spin just a little.

Did I want to be chosen?

By her?

My sudden silence drew the quizzical gaze of Hikari, but a moment later she turned to Kunagisa. “Um, Tomo? If you do know, I hope that you’ll tell me.”

“Sure, why not? It took a while to pin it down, but I finally figured it out,” Kunagisa nodded gamely. “Erm, where should I start?”

“Um, well first, if you wouldn’t mind… Could you tell me what you meant earlier? About knowing so much you don’t know?”

“It’s like the difference between bottom-up and top-down,” I cut in, lacking faith in Kunagisa’s ability to explain it. “Like, say, for example, if that table is a sandbox and you want to make a mound of sand as high as possible. What would you do?”

“Start from the sides and push all the sand together into a mountain.”

“Right. So would I. But Kunagisa wouldn’t do that. She would take a whole bunch of sand and just dump it on the table. The resulting mountain of sand would be just like the one you and I built. You and I would gradually build up to the final product. Kunagisa would remove things to get to the final product. That’s how her mind processes things. Right, Tomo?”

“I don’t really get your analogy, Iichan.”

Way to strand me.

At any rate, Hikari seemed to get me, and she nodded along. “Okay, so if you’ve figured it out, Tomo, could you explain the trick to me?” she requested.

“Yeppie, if you’ll answer my question.”

Hikari stared back blankly, clueless as to what that meant, but Kunagisa, paying no mind, turned toward her machines. She pointed to the screen of the computer I’d booted up.

“Okay, first let’s review the scene of the crime. Ta-daa. The atelier!”

She used an image viewer program to display a full picture: that marbled River Styx, and the decapitated corpse on the far shore… The images vividly revived our memories of the morning, but oblivious to all that, Kunagisa began her explanation.

“The obstacle…is all this paint. The earthquake happened at one a.m., causing the shelf to fall over, which resulted in what you now see. That much is clear. The river is too wide to jump. If we suppose the murder happened after the earthquake, the killer’s means of entry is a mystery. Or at least, the means of exit is. You with me so far?”

“Yes. So far.”

“It would be easy to pin the crime on Tenaga Ashinaga, but the answer isn’t that simple.”

Hikari gave an ambiguous smile. Maybe she didn’t know the legend of the long-legged giant, or maybe she did. It didn’t matter.

“So you’re forced to think that the murder happened before the earthquake. If that were the case, it would’ve been easy for the murderer to get in and out. No footprints, no lock on the atelier door. In which case, it seems like Akane must be the killer, since she was the only one who didn’t have an alibi. But that’s where Shinya’s testimony comes in. He confirmed that he heard Kanami’s voice when he called her after the earthquake. In other words, she must have been alive at least for a few minutes afterwards. So, Hikari, what to do?”

“Well, uh…” Hikari tilted her head to the side. It was pretty adorable. “I guess the window? It’s the only other way. But the window is locked, so…”

“The window, huh? There is that possibility. Glass is more liquid than solid, conceptually speaking, so I see how you might think that a lock means nothing. Or we might even speak of a tunnel effect.”

Uh, that was just misleading.

“You must’ve figured it out by this point, right, Hikari?” teased Kunagisa.

“Not even a little.”

“It’s the post hoc fallacy, Hikari,” I said, coming to her rescue. I’d been holding out because she looked so cute confused, but I was beginning to feel bad for her.

Kunagisa nodded. “Yup. Post hoc ergo propter hoc. Translates to ‘erroneous cause and effect.’ A mistaken syllogism. The assumption, it’s about assumptions. The world isn’t so neatly ordered.”

“I don’t understand Latin.”

“Hey, but you knew it was Latin.”

“Thanks to the ergo.”

Cogito ergo sum, huh?

Hikari was sharper than she seemed.

“For example,” Kunagisa continued, “imagine I’ve got a hundred-yen coin, and I say, ‘It’s going to come up heads.’ I said it, okay? And then I toss the coin. Okay, it’s heads! What do you think? You think it was a coincidence, right? That’s normal. But some people get it wrong. They figure I said I would throw a heads and it was heads, therefore I must have some kind of special power to control the coin.”

For the record, it was a trick coin.

“I drank some alcohol and my cold went away, therefore alcohol cures colds. I turned on my computer and a visitor showed up, therefore computers summon visitors. A man looked at a woman, and she happened to be looking in his direction, therefore she must like him. A catfish was wiggling, and then an earthquake happened, so the earthquake must have been the catfish’s fault. None of that makes much sense, right, Hikari? In other words, just because B happens after A doesn’t mean A and B have a cause-effect relationship. Things happen chronologically, sequentially, but that’s no reflection of causality. So let’s think about this case now. There was an earthquake then a river of paint formed, therefore, is that a causal relationship?”

“Oh.”

Oh. That.

It finally dawned on her.

“So that river wasn’t caused by the earthquake…”

“Well, the shelf itself probably really did fall over because of it. And it probably did cause a little bit of paint to spill out. Kanami even said so on the phone. But I doubt it would’ve caused such an incredible amount of paint to spill. The paint cans probably rolled around and let a few drops out. If you think about it, those paint can lids are relatively strong, so it’s not likely that just falling over would’ve caused them to spill all over the place like that. But even if it was just a little bit, Kanami was confined to a wheelchair, so for her it was impossible to leave the atelier.”

“Oh, I see where this is going,” Hikari said. “That makes sense. So then the killer snuck into the room and murdered her. Then, on the way out, purposely poured paint around the room, little by little. If you did it slowly, little by little, you could make a river like that without leaving any footprints,” Hikari said with a vacant look, as if she were imagining the killer walking backwards with a can of paint.

Yup. We had all assumed that the earthquake had caused the river of paint. But in reality, it didn’t take a natural disaster or a natural

artist to spill the paint or to draw the river. It could've been the work of any amateur.

No artistic talent required.

It wouldn't have taken ten minutes.

"But why would the killer do that?" asked Hikari.

"Probably to make us think the murder happened before the quake," I said. "They must not have known Kanami talked to Shinya on the phone. So they figured by making the river, we'd be led to conjecture that the crime occurred before the quake."

"So this means…"

"Yes. It means," I said, clapping my hands together and then spreading them out wide, "the suspect list just got way longer."

There were only four people with post-quake alibis: Iria and Rei, and then Maki and Shinya. The remaining people were no longer cleared of suspicion.

"So then there's no point in keeping Akane locked up, right?" Hikari said cheerfully. "I mean, right? She's not the only one under suspicion anymore."

She must have been feeling pretty guilty about how we had treated Akane. It seemed Hikari wasn't much of a mathematical thinker. It was quite a contrast from the rational Akane Sonoyama herself. I decided to tell Hikari.

"Akane already knew about the paint trick, too. She's just pretending she doesn't know."

"Why?" Hikari said, looking honestly baffled. "Isn't that strange? Why would she do something like that?"

"To maintain the equilibrium. That brain of hers sure keeps busy."

To create the best possible circumstances, she was disregarding her own foul circumstances. It was almost an inhuman way of thinking,

but extremely admirable nonetheless.

“So we should keep this a secret then, huh?”

“Yeah. The killer is still at large, so I don’t think it would be good to upset the situation any. I suppose Iria has a right to know, though. As far as that goes, I think you should do as you see fit.”

I wasn’t going to be that much of a roadblock.

Hikari let out a moan. “But it’s so… I mean, the river not really being caused by the earthquake…is so simple. Like I should’ve seen it a long time ago.”

“Yeah, I couldn’t believe it, either. But you know, any trick seems simple once you figure it out. I’ve seen tons of tricks that were even stupider. In comparison, this one was decent,” I somehow found myself rushing to the culprit’s defense in face of Hikari’s intense disappointment. “Saying that afterwards isn’t fair.”

“But who comes up with such a trick right after an earthquake?” asked Hikari, still dissatisfied. “I mean, what were the odds there was even going to be an earthquake? It’s all too much of a coincidence.”

“Well, it’s the Law of Great Numbers, Hikari.”

“What is that?” The maid seemed suspicious of the term when Kunagisa brought it up. “The Law of Great Numbers?”

“It means that something looks like an amazing coincidence, but when you sit down and think about it, it’s not really so amazing after all. Like, for example, if you saw someone win the lottery, wouldn’t you find it amazing? You’re less likely to hit the jackpot than to be struck by a meteor. But if you think about it, that’s only true if the guy only bought one lottery ticket. Practically nobody who plays the lottery only buys one ticket, one time. If you have a group of twenty-three people, there’s a fifty percent chance two of them will have the same birthday. Even so, it seems incredible, right? That’s the Law of Great Numbers. The earthquake just happened to come today, but it wouldn’t have changed anything if

it had happened tomorrow instead. Plus, it's not likely that the killer was counting on this earthquake trick alone. Mr. Culprit probably considered a whole variety of ideas. There you go."

"So you mean like multiple means to one end?"

"Yup yup, you got it. And it all relates back to that mistaken causality," Kunagisa said, poking Hikari with her index finger. "Now. It's time for my question."

"Ah, of course. We made a deal." Hikari righted her posture and nodded. "Go ahead, ask me anything."

"Why is Iria here?"

It was a question that made the air bristle.

Here.

This island.

Wet Crow's Feather Island.

Why was Iria Akagami here?

In a single instant, Hikari's usual cheerful demeanor went completely stiff. She had frozen, clearly panicking. It wasn't confusion, but utter fear, pure and simple.

Was it really that bad?

"Um, uh, well…" her voice trembled, unable to put the words together. "Well, um, that's…"

"You can't answer?"

"Just that one question□please don't make me, Tomo." Hikari leaned forward and hung her head, looking genuinely contrite. She would have fallen over if she'd bowed any lower. "I'll answer anything else, just not this."

She looked truly pitiable. It was like we were the devil trying to get

her to do something wicked. Hand me your soul instead. That which you hold dearest belongs to me now… Such awful nonsense.

“No, it’s okay, we don’t mind,” I said, breaking into the give-and-take. “Right, Tomo?”

“Yup. No use trying to force it out of ya.” For all her selfishness, Kunagisa was being uncharacteristically sensitive. “Sorry, Hikari.”

“No, I’m the one who’s sorry. After asking you to my heart’s content…” Hikari stood up. “Please excuse me.”

She started to leave, but then paused and looked back.

“Oh, by the way.” She sounded like Detective Columbo or something, except it wasn’t in the least bit unpleasant when a cute maid did it. It even brought a smile to my face. “This has nothing to do with my mistress. I’m asking you personally… Do you really believe Maki Himena has special powers?”

Did we believe? Maki’s ESP?

The ability to know all.

After thinking for a moment, I answered. “Right now, there’s no particular reason not to as long as we put aside common sense.”

“I don’t really care if she has ’em or not,” Kunagisa chimed in.

“Yes, you’re probably right.” Hikari gave a convinced nod, then left the room.

My eyes stayed on the door for a while as I thought about her bizarre reaction to our question about Iria.

“Well, whatever…”

It probably didn’t have anything to do with the current case. It seemed highly unlikely that Iria’s exile here had any influence on Kanami’s death. I looked away from the door and toward Kunagisa. Boing boinnng, the workstation emitted a strange noise just then. I looked over at it to see Kunagisa had once again started doing

something on it.

“What’s up?”

“Mail, I got some mail. From Chee. He’s a fast one. People used to always say he ignores the theory of relativity like it was a traffic light.”

She had asked him to run a check this afternoon, so he sure wasn’t slow□not to mention the fact that he was incarcerated.

“Huh, Himena’s real name is Shinari Himena. Wow. That’s a much better name. I wonder why she uses a fake one.”

“Her real name? Hey, this guy even tracked down trivial stuff like that?”

“Yep. He was supposed to see how everyone was connected, but man, he sure has a lousy personality. Someone ought to educate him. Seriously, he doesn’t understand how to deal with people at all. Oh, wait. Here it is. Hey, Iichan, we’ve got a connection.”

I went over to her, but everything on the screen was in English, so I didn’t understand it.

“Why don’t you understand English, Iichan? Where was it that you studied abroad? The South Pole? Mars?”

“I forgot it, that’s all. If you don’t use something, it only stays with you for three or four months, y’know? Besides, my reading and writing were always worse than my conversation.”

“Didn’t the ER program entrance exam require English, Russian, and Chinese? How’d you get in? Backdoor?”

“It’s like I’m tellin’ you, I used to know it.”

“Sounds like a lie to me. Anyway, I’ll translate. It says ‘Kanami Ibuki and Akane Sonoyama were spotted having lunch in a Chicago café.’ About half a year ago. It’s an eyewitness account. Hmm, ‘lunch.’ I wonder why. Don’t those two hate each other?”

“They had lunch together?”

As suspected, they had a connection. But why those two? Akane had lived in the States, and Kanami was a world-renowned artist, so it wasn’t that implausible that they could’ve met over there, but they sure weren’t the sort of pair to be having lunch dates together.

“Yup, and it wasn’t just a lunch date, either. It was at a super-secret club.”

“Secret club?”

Speaking of sounding like a lie.

“Yup,” Kunagisa nodded. “But those places really do exist. Even in Japan there are some, though not many. All sorts of politicians and celebrities and their families go there. Maybe ‘high-class clubs’ would be a more accurate description. The security at those places is out of this world.”

Which raised the question of how this guy got the information, but I sure wasn’t about to ask. Sometimes it’s better not to touch the other end of the tunnel.

“Is that definite?”

“Chee doesn’t lie. Even if he sometimes withholds the truth. I guess that makes him like you.”

“Eh…I lie plenty.”

But putting that aside.

So Akane Sonoyama and Kanami Ibuki had a connection. Whether or not it was important information, it was certainly something to be concerned about. I decided it was probably best to confirm it with Akane tomorrow. It never occurred to me that this would turn out to be impossible.

“There’s some other stuff here about how everyone’s doing recently. Nacchan’s doing about the same… Ah, Sacchan seems to be having some rough times. Hiichan has…gone missing. That is so him. The

Admiral found a job… Nice job. Acchan… Oops! Everyone else is doing well. Chee, too. That's a relief. Have to admit, I was feeling a little guilty."

Feeling a little left out as she immersed herself in memories of the good ol' days, I rolled over on the sofa. "Let's get to sleep already," I mumbled. Since Akane was in the storeroom now, I was stuck sleeping here…

"Hup." Kunagisa finished checking her mail, switched off the workstation, and dove off the revolving chair into bed. Then she rose to her knees. "Iichan, let's sleep together tonight for sure."

"Pass."

"It's still cold at night. If you sleep over there you'll catch a cold. This bed is a king-size. Lotsa room."

"Pass."

"Come on, I won't do anything! We'd just be sleeping together, that's all. I won't even touch you. You can even sleep with your back to me. Come on, that's not so bad, right?"

"Pass."

"Please? I'm lonely over here."

Damn bastard.

She was really digging in this time.

I got up from the couch and looked her right in the eye. "You swear you won't do anything?"

"Yes."

"You swore. I'm gonna believe you."

"No sweat," she nodded with a happy look. "I won't let you down."

And so that night I slept on a real bed for the first time in a long

time. A very long time. Not that I was expecting anything, but she really did keep her promise, and I could hear her sleep-breathing behind me. But since I had my back to her, I didn't know if she was really sleeping.

"……"

Then I remembered.

The old days. About back then. Five years ago.

Five years…

Iichan.

She always called me that, with that sense of familiarity.

Her heart was just as open to me now, like we had never been apart.

Wide open, no façades.

Five years.

I really don't like meeting up with people from the past. Whether they've changed or not, it's a lonely experience for me.

Nevertheless, Kunagisa's house was the first place I went when I came back to Japan, before even going to my own home, and I did so without hesitation.

The blue-haired girl.

She still looked exactly the same.

Like those years had never happened.

I closed my eyes.

Surely this was the first time we'd slept side by side in a long while.

Just take her, Akane said.

If you want to be her one and only.

If you want not to be liked, but chosen.

“Nonsense…”

What if…

If I told Akane I had already tried that before, would she hold it against me?

It hadn’t been out of love, but out of a desire for destruction.

“……”

But Akane.

It didn’t accomplish a thing.

Really.

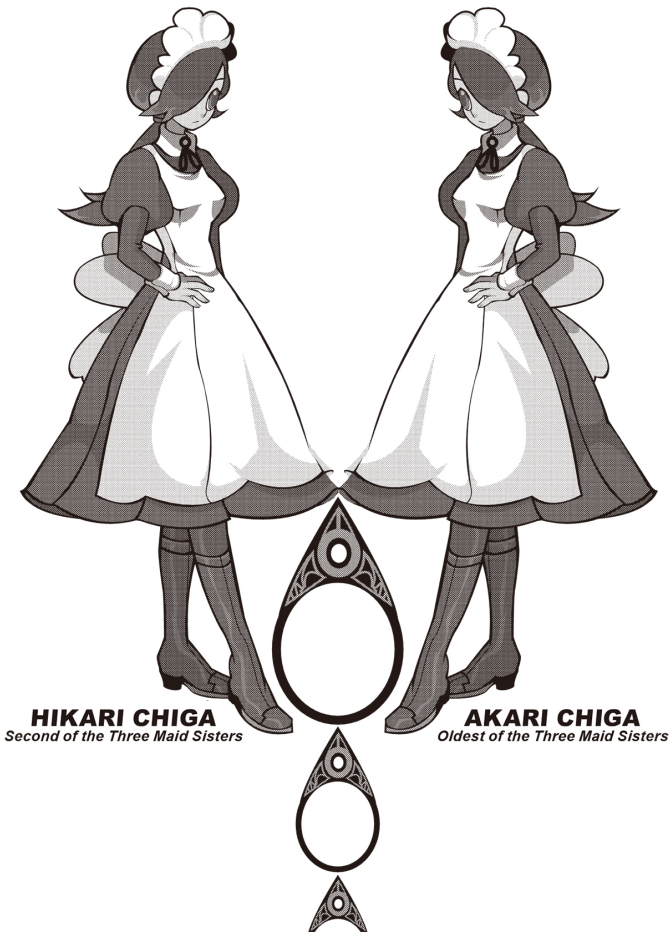
Really, it accomplished nothing.

So then what?

Then what should I do?

Please tell me.

FIFTH DAY (1)
Two Decapitation



HIKARI CHIGA
Second of the Three Maid Sisters

AKARI CHIGA
Oldest of the Three Maid Sisters

0

Death to wolves, and to pigs, too.

1

I awoke to a loud knocking. My head still swirling with sleep, I got up and opened the door only to have Hikari charge into the room and grab me by the collar.

“You bastard!” she suddenly screamed.

No, this wasn’t Hikari, I realized. Even if heaven and earth were to change places five thousand times per second, she wouldn’t say “You bastard!” To say something like that and grab me by the collar was, for Hikari, physically impossible. She lacked the ability. This was most likely not Teruko either…so it must be…Akari?

“Because of you, this□goddammit! You shithead!”

Even for Akari, this was pretty uncharacteristic behavior. In a complete frenzy, she looked as if she was going to start pummeling me any second. Or actually, she had already beaten on my chest several times at this point. I was just too surprised by her behavior to notice the pain.

“I’m so tired of this happening.” She was panting and trembling. “No more of this… It’s just too awful… It’s too awful. Why? Why?!”

“Take it easy, Akari.” I grabbed her shoulders and gave her a firm shaking. “Did something…happen?”

She shot me a glare. It was a look of true resentment. Vengeful indignation from the core of her being.

Her eyes were also marked by deep sorrow as she glared with all her might.

Hadn’t Hikari said something yesterday along the lines of “We’ve been trained to maintain our composure”? It wasn’t likely that Hikari had undergone training that Akari hadn’t. Yet here she was, out of her mind. What the hell had happened?

At last, she shook her head gently. “I’m so sorry. Please excuse me, my behavior was very inappropriate.” She hung her head in shame. “It’s not even your fault. This terrible thing isn’t your fault…”

“Hey, don’t worry about it… But what exactly happened?” I repeated my question. “Whatever it was, please tell me.”

Instead of answering directly, she spun around with her back to me. “Please come with me to the first-floor storage room,” she said, and began walking.

I stood there dumbfounded.

“…What was that?”

Akari and Teruko had supposedly spent the night on the mainland; when had they gotten back? According to the watch Kunagisa had fixed for me, it was already ten o’clock in the morning (although it was hard to read, since the numbers were backward). It was unlike me to have overslept. How embarrassing.

But now was no time for such thoughts. When Akari had returned and how long I overslept were far too trivial matters at this point. More importantly…

More importantly.

“What was it she just said?”

The first-floor storage room…

I had a bad feeling about this.

Who was down there?

A real bad feeling.

What was happening on this island?

A really bad feeling.

And the feeling was probably right. There was a pattern developing here.

“Hey, wake up, Tomo.”

“Hnnh? Gmorning… Put my hair up?”

Kunagisa sleepily raised her head. She wore a strangely content expression, like she had been having a nice dream.

“It seems like now’s not the time for that.”

She rubbed her eyes and said, “That means I don’t have to wash my face, either.”

2

An inward-opening door.

On the other side, Akane lay face-down, her body pointing toward us. As a result, the cross section of the cut as well as all the flesh and bone and veins it revealed was in plain sight. It was a grotesque reminder that in the end, human beings are nothing more than giant wads of organic matter.

Yes.

It was yet another decapitated body.

Just like Kanami's, the head had been completely severed from the very base of the neck.

It was dressed in a suit. An expensive-looking, gray one. Ruined by bloodstains. But even supposing it hadn't been, just as was the case with Kanami's dress the day before, the person for whom it was meant was gone.

The room was stark and barren. I had spent three days in here. Akane hadn't lasted one night.

It was an empty room. The only things inside it were a wooden chair by the wall, a house telephone hanging on the wall, a futon, a few books Akane had presumably brought with her, and the lamp stand.

"The door was locked, right?" Iria asked. "Right, Hikari?"

"Yes." Hikari's voice was trembling. I looked over to see that her body was, too. "It was definitely locked. No mistake."

"Well, was it the window, then?"

I looked up at the sound of Iria's voice. At the very top of the wall opposite the door, where we all stood, was a rectangular window. But it was strictly for letting in sunlight and ventilation. As far as allowing someone to sneak in or get out, it was way too…

It was open.

It had an open/close lever operated from inside the room. If you thought about it, it was just big enough to let a single person pass through, with some effort.

But still…

"It's too high," I said to no one in particular.

Breaking in through that window would be like taking a two-story dive, and breaking out would've been even worse. The impossibility of getting in or out through that window was the reason we chose this room as Akane's cell in the first place.

In other words, the window was impenetrable.

However.

The only other point of entry or exit had been locked.

In other words.

Another sealed room.

A second decapitation, a second locked room.

2 Decapitation, 2 Locked room.

Kunagisa, who was standing next to me, let out an odd moan.

I tried to say something, but ultimately stayed silent.

Lying on the floor before us was the headless body of the woman we had suspected was the killer. In a situation like this, what words were suitable?

The head was nowhere to be found.

This meant that just like with Kanami, accidental death and suicide were out of the question.

“Anyway, it looks like we’ve got some things to reconsider,” Iria finally said. “Can we all gather in the dining room? Hikari, lock this room.”

Once again, Iria was the first to leave. Rei quietly followed close behind.

“Some things to reconsider?” I muttered with a good deal of self-loathing. Indeed, that was right. All of our thinking and every speculation we had made up to this point would have to be wiped clean. It also seemed as if we had a lot of new details to consider.

“I guess this makes it a serial killing,” I mumbled, again with self-loathing.

A serial killing.

I had locked Akane in here to prevent that very thing. And she had become the second victim as a result.

Yeah, real equilibrium we had created. What the hell did I think would happen? What did I expect from a person who kills others and plucks off their heads? Did I expect human calculations and strategic thinking?

I had felt so relaxed. Totally at ease. Completely proud of myself.

I had stopped the killer from moving around. I was so confident. Carried away. Big-headed.

Akane’s words from the previous night all came rushing back. The words she had left me with.

“……”

Could this be forgiven?

“It’s nonsense, really…”

I turned on my heels and left the crime scene.

At that moment, I spotted Yayoi out of the corner of my eye. She looked terribly pale. Even more so than yesterday. I guess you'd expect as much from anyone who'd seen two headless corpses in as many days. It wasn't like looking at pork or chicken.

Still, there was something just then Yayoi seemed to notice my gaze and sped off to the dining room, as if to get away from me.

I wondered what that was about while Kunagisa tugged on my arm.

"Iichan, let's go already. Iria'll get tired of waiting around. Everyone's already gone; there's no point sticking around."

I nodded. "Yeah… You're right."

Things to rethink, and new things to think about.

As such, the morning of the fifth day was total crap.

3

“It was around two in the morning,” Hikari said.

Dining room. Round table.

But we were two fewer than just two days ago. Genius artist Kanami Ibuki and Akane Sonoyama of the Seven Fools.

The bickering duo was no more. They were no longer alive.

“I received a phone call in my room…from Sonoyama. She said she had forgotten a book in her room that she wanted me to bring her.”

“And then?” Iria said. “I presume you did as you were told?”

“Yes,” Hikari nodded. “It was a kind of old-looking paperback of Bakaichi by Mushanokoji.”

“That’s not really important. So at that time, Akane was still alive, yes? And she had a head?”

“Yes, at that time she was alive,” Hikari stated unequivocally.

It meant that Akane had been killed after two a.m. I had assumed I was the last person to see Akane alive, so I was a little surprised. But really, I don’t suppose I had “seen” her, per se, since we had only spoken through the door.

Her body had apparently been discovered around nine o’clock that morning. She usually woke up and had breakfast at a set time every day, so Hikari was concerned when no call came from Akane’s room, and thus became the one to discover the body.

At first she had suspected that Akane had merely overslept on account of being in a new environment. But reality had something else in store. At any rate, assuming Hikari’s testimony was true, the

time of the murder was limited to a seven-and-a-half-hour window. The body didn't appear freshly killed at the time it was discovered, so it seemed that the murder probably occurred in the middle of the night.

"Well then," Iria said, looking over the people at the table. "Let's start looking at alibis like we did yesterday."

She sounded like she was playing some kind of game. I won't claim to be able to judge what was inside Iria's heart, but at the very least, she seemed to have no sense of sadness or grief or reservation.

Fine. Whoever it was or whatever had happened, other people were other people. That's all there was to it.

"This time, I don't have an alibi." I decided to get the ball rolling since nobody was talking. "Hikari came to visit our room around ten or eleven last night, I think. But then Kunagisa and I went to bed and fell asleep."

"You went to bed together?" Iria teased.

"Yeah, right. It was just a figure of speech. I slept on the sofa."

"I see… But if you both went to sleep, there's no way of confirming that one of you didn't slip out in the middle of the night."

"Oh, oh, but you can rule me out." Kunagisa slid her hand horizontally across her neck. "The storage room is on the first floor, right? I can't go downstairs alone."

"What?" Not only Iria, but everyone gawked at Kunagisa in surprise. Well, everyone except for Maki, who wore an utterly indifferent expression, as if to say, "I already knew that." But you can always count on her to be the exception.

"That's why I always make Iichan come with me."

Yup. I hadn't come to this island just because I was bored or interested. I had a bona fide reason for being here, and Kunagisa needed me.

Kunagisa had a wide array of unique quirks and characteristics that made everyday life a serious health risk, but among those were three major ones, and within those three was one of special note: she couldn't handle extreme vertical locomotion on her own.

That was a rule.

I suppose it's more fitting to call it a stern, compulsive, non-negotiable rule that lay somewhere within her mind than a "quirk." If you forced her, she screamed and shouted and you couldn't lay a finger on her. It was the same way five years ago. I wondered if she might have been cured, but it seemed it wasn't such a simple condition.

"Is that right?" The look of surprise remained on Iria's face. "But this is the first time I've heard about this."

"Well, it's not really something you bring up for no reason. But if you've been observing me, you'll note that I haven't gone up or down any stairs alone the whole time I've been on this island."

I was always with her during meals, or else she stayed cooped up in her room.

Tomo Kunagisa.

"Now that you mention it, you do always have him come to your room to get you. But we don't have any way to prove this."

"We do have a medical certificate," I said. "It's a kind of mental disorder, a neurosis. So I think we can confirm Kunagisa's alibi for now."

Not mine, though.

Iria seemed to be pondering this for a moment, but then she switched her train of thought. "Well, what about you, Himena?"

"I was in my room drinking all night." Maki looked over at Shinya. "Together with that wonderful gentleman over there."

"Is that right, Sakaki?"

“Well, I don’t know about the gentleman part, but otherwise, yes.” He gave Maki a little nod. “I only meant to go bother her for a little bit, but I ended up staying all night drinking.”

That makes two nights in a row that they were up drinking. They must have had incredible endurance. Or maybe that wasn’t the case for Shinya. Maybe he just couldn’t bear being sober after losing Kanami.

I could imagine how important she was to him. He had taught her painting and seen her surpass him. She was special. Her existence had been important to him.

“Neither of us were particularly intoxicated, so I think we can vouch for each other,” Shinya said. “Let’s see… It was around one in the morning. I couldn’t get to sleep, you know, because of what happened, so I went to the living room and there she was. Then she invited me to her room, and we ended up staying there until morning.”

“……”

So he said. Even if that wasn’t the whole story, he apparently did stay in her room; so the two of them had solid alibis.

“I was sleeping the whole time,” Yayoi said before even being asked, as if cutting in line. “I’ve got no alibi at all. But I think Hikari can at least vouch that I got up at six a.m. and that she helped me prepare breakfast.”

For some reason, she was sort of mumbling her words, and she looked up to see Iria’s reaction. There was something off about her, and something about her bizarre disposition was bothering me. It’s hard to explain, but something caught my attention. I just didn’t know what it was.

“Hmm,” Iria said, pursing her lips. “How about you, Hikari?”

“Well, I delivered the book to Sonoyama at two a.m., then I went to bed. So I don’t have an alibi until the time I woke up this morning.”

“I see… Oh, I suppose I have to give my story as well. I was in my

room talking with Rei all night. We were discussing what to do from here on and about Aikawa, whom Akari and Teruko had gone to get. Isn't that right, Rei?"

Rei silently nodded.

"I had already slept that afternoon, so I couldn't get to sleep at night," the mistress continued. "By the time we finished talking, it was already morning, so I figured it was too late to try and sleep, so then…the usual things, and then finally breakfast. I think that's a solid alibi, isn't it?"

For some reason, Iria looked at me when she said this. It was a defiant gaze.

I shrugged. "Yup, sure is. So when did Teruko and Akari get back?"

"At about nine o'clock." It was Akari, who had only a short while ago jumped me in Kunagisa's room. She had completely returned to normal by this point, but she didn't try to make eye contact with me.

"Nine o'clock…"

Speaking of which, she had said something kind of strange earlier. "I'm so tired of this happening," or something to that effect. But what was she so "tired" of? No matter how you looked at it, there was something strange about her whole manner at that time.

Something told me she wasn't just referring to Kanami's death.

"Well, I guess that means Akari and Teruko have an alibi, yes? Which means…" Iria said. "The people with alibis are Sakaki and Himena, me and Rei, and Teruko and Akari. And most likely Kunagisa as well. That's seven."

On the other side we had myself, Yayoi Sashirono, and Hikari Chiga. The three of us had no alibis. But while the question of who had an alibi was an issue, there was also a bigger issue here.

"Um, Hikari?"

“Yes?” She looked in my direction.

“Maybe I’m being too trivial here, but could you tell me whether or not the window was open when you delivered the book to the storage room at two o’clock?”

She looked off into space as she thought about it for a moment. “I believe it was closed,” she answered.

“I see. Is it something a person could easily open?”

“Yes. It’s supposed to be for ventilation, so if you just use the lever□you have to crank it like this□it opens and closes normally. But that’s only from the inside. It’s completely sealed off from the outside.”

“I see…”

This was a troublesome development. A very troublesome development. A window more than ten feet high. Without a ladder, it was virtually impossible for someone to climb out, and even more implausible that someone had climbed in.

In other words, we had another “locked room” mystery.

“Um, then tell me, Hikari, how did you go about handling the key? Are there copies of it or anything?”

“I have the only key. There are no copies or master keys.”

She seemed pretty worried. Which was only natural. The implications of this conversation were that she was the only one who could’ve committed the crime. Just looking at it objectively, that was the most likely case.

But I wasn’t about to point that out. I didn’t want to cause another Akane-style mishap.

“What type of lock is it?”

“Just a normal one. You twist the key like this and the bolt latches. I don’t know the official name…”

“And you definitely locked the door at two a.m.?”

“I did. For sure. I even checked several times…” she answered with a somewhat pained expression, “so I’m sure of it.”

“I see…”

She was an honest girl.

To the point that it must have made life difficult for her. Seeing her like this, it seemed clear to me that she wasn’t the killer. If she were the killer, she wouldn’t have gone to all the trouble to report that she had been called to Akane’s room in the middle of the night. Anyone would be at least that smart.

Of course, you couldn’t throw out the possibility that she had strategized all this to fool everyone. That kind of argument could go on forever.

I continued with my questions. “And nobody else was in her room when you went there? What about the possibility that someone was hiding in the dark?”

“Well, I didn’t sense anybody else in the room, but” she tilted her head as if she didn’t quite get the point of my question “I can’t be certain. I didn’t actually go into the room. I gave her the book at the door.”

“Weren’t you scared?” Yayoi suddenly asked, her voice faint. She wore an upset expression as she continued. “I mean, didn’t we all think Sonoyama might be the killer? And you met with her alone, in the middle of the night? Weren’t you scared?”

“No, not at all,” Hikari answered after a moment’s hesitation. “I didn’t think Sonoyama was the killer.”

“Why not?” For some reason, Yayoi was being strangely pushy with Hikari. “What makes you so sure?”

“Uh, well…” Hikari looked over at me with a troubled expression. Ah, it was because of her conversation with Kunagisa yesterday. Indeed, after hearing that conversation, there was no reason to

suspect Akane in particular.

I thought about things as I watched this exchange unfold between the two. But I couldn't pin anything down. It had seemed to me that if something had happened, it probably happened around two a.m., when Hikari delivered the book, but then, after listening to her testimony, that didn't seem to be the case.

So what to do now? How to continue?

"I don't suppose this was strictly a locked room. The window was open, after all," Iria said to me. "In that sense it's not exactly what you would define as 'sealed.'"

"But it's impossible to get in or out through that window."

"There's a chair in the room, right? Couldn't you reach the window if you stood on the chair?"

"I don't think so. Even if you stretched and jumped at the same time, I don't think you'd reach it. Shinya is the tallest person here, and I don't think even he could reach it."

"Ah. So Ibuki's room was sealed off by a river of paint, and this time it's a room sealed off by a height problem…" Iria stretched out her arms with an irritated sigh. "And both were decapitated."

Yeah, there was that issue as well.

Why had the killer cut off Kanami's and Akane's heads? That was still a mystery. There was no reason to suspect switched bodies, but what other reason was there to cut off the heads? Could we just write it off as bizarre and abnormal behavior?

What's more, the fact that the killer took the severed head didn't make much sense. Of course, there was also the possibility that the killer severed the head in order to abscond with it, but what in the world do you do with a human head?

And that question just led to another question: Why were these women killed in the first place? I had no idea. This case was full of things I didn't understand. It was all hopeless and meaningless.

Dammit.

Since when had I become so dumb?

“Hmm. Looking at things objectively, Hikari is the most suspicious one here,” Iria declared all of a sudden.

Hikari instantly flinched. “Wha… U-Um, I…”

“Hikari was the one with the key, and one of the three people with no alibi. If the window isn’t a possible entrance or exit, the door is the only option, right? There are three people without alibis, but only one of those three had the key□”

“Please hold on a second,” I barged into Iria’s monologue. “That’s no good. That’s not a fair assumption.”

“Assumption? I believe the correct term is ‘reasoning.’”

Hikari watched our interaction with a worried expression. She seemed to have no idea what to say.

“It’s like Akane told us yesterday,” I reminded Iria. “It’s foolish to reach a conclusion based on the process of elimination and selective thinking. I won’t go as far as to call it foolish, but I do think we’re leaving things out. It’s one thing to reason that way, and another thing to be on the receiving end of it.”

“I wonder. Is that right? I don’t think so, personally.”

“It was that thinking that led us to lock up Akane as the prime suspect. And this is the result. This is the result of that, Iria. There’s nothing I can say about what’s already over and done, but we can’t let ourselves make the same mistake again. You understand, right? It was too dangerous for anyone to be left alone.”

“Now you tell me,” Iria said with a sweet smile. Under different circumstances, it might have even been charming. “Wasn’t it your idea to have Akane locked up□sorry, was it guarded?”

“That’s correct. I’m not here to debate that fact. It was I who suggested we lock her up in there, and so now it is my duty to

counter that suggestion. If I have to take responsibility for what happened, making sure it doesn't happen again is how I'll take that responsibility. At this point, it's still too early to determine who the killer is. We're still not even thinking about the things we need to be thinking about."

Maki let out a big yawn. Possibly because she hadn't slept in two days, or possibly because she was bored by all the talk. Most likely it was both.

Damn bystander.

"Well, I still think Hikari is the most suspicious."

There was absolutely no sense of compassion in Iria's words for her maid, who had lived under the same roof and served her mistress all these years. Not a shred of sentimentality. She spoke with the icy-cold tone of someone simply reporting facts as facts, with no emotion inserted whatsoever.

I thought I got it.

The answer to Kunagisa's question from yesterday. The reason this woman had been disowned by the Akagami family. Why she lived on this island.

Iria Akagami. For her, the world was uniformly equal, equally lacking in worth. And so she was searching for something of value; unable to find it, she was able to rid her life of anything without hesitation.

I had been wondering what she had done. I had assumed she had done something.

But in reality, maybe that was woefully off the mark. Maybe it wasn't that she had done anything wrong, but that she just couldn't stay a part of the Akagami family. Furthermore, maybe it wasn't the family that had shunned her, but in fact the other way around. It wasn't out of the question.

And here I thought it was supposed to be her job to stick up for Hikari.

“Well, let’s do this then,” I suggested without looking at Iria. “We can say for a fact that it’s no longer safe for anyone to be alone. So let’s divide into teams. No complaints about that, right, Iria? I don’t think I need to bother explaining the purpose of making teams. It’s just safer than moving around alone. And that way we can also keep an eye on one another. Now, since I’ve been sticking up for Hikari, I’ll be on her team. Her, Kunagisa, and I will be Team A. How’s that sound?”

“Hmm, interesting.” Iria seemed somewhat impressed. “You’re smarter than you look. Teams, huh? Well, naturally I’ll be teamed up with Rei and Akari and Teruko. Then let’s have Maki, Shinya, and Yayoi on Team C. Shinya and Maki have confirmed each other as being innocent twice in a row now, so Yayoi can put herself at ease. And even if Yayoi is the killer, it would be two against one. Does that sound okay?”

“What if we just had everyone stay in the dining room together? Until Aikawa gets here?” Hikari suggested, looking over at me with an anxious expression. “That way nobody has to be alone and the killer can’t take any actions, either.”

“We can’t do that. You mean just stay put here? Don’t be ridiculous,” I said not only to Hikari, but to the entire group. “Kunagisa and I have some moving around to do.”

4

For the time being, we decided to bury Akane's body. As was the case with Kanami's body the day before, simply leaving it there on the floor was out of the question. Iria didn't seem to have any plans to call the police anyway, so we went ahead and did as we felt.

We decided it would be best to use the digital camera to first take pictures of the scene of the crime as we had done the day before, then go bury the body in the mountain woods behind the mansion, so the three of us headed back to Kunagisa's room. But our plans would end up being slightly modified.

"Gah!"

The instant Kunagisa entered the room, she let out a scream that reverberated out into the hall.

I took a peek in and discovered the reason.

"This is… Wow…"

"Ahh… Oh no…" Hikari was uncharacteristically vocal. "This is terrible…"

Destroyed.

It was destroyed.

Inside her room lay destruction. All three of her computers, the two PCs and the workstation. They had been smashed to bits.

"Wahhh! Why did this happen?!" Kunagisa frantically scrambled over to the completely exposed, mostly unrecognizable mess of mechanical parts. "Awful awful awful awful awful awful! This is bullying! Demonic! There is a demon on this island! It's Diabolos, Iichan! A tragedy! Gaaah! This is the ruptured-organ compound-

fracture of computers! Even the monitors are busted! Why?! Ah, this keyboard was impossible to build! The holographic memory! Oh my God, the motherboard!!! What happened to□oh my God, it's snapped! What the hell is this?!?!"

She had lost it. Like flipping a switch. For a happy-go-lucky girl like her, this was a fairly rare state of being. Or at least it was the first time I'd seen her like this since coming back to Japan.

"Why would they do something like this? Oh, it's too awful… Iichan Iichan Iichan… Whaddaya think?"

"It's ghastly." Even supposing these computers had killed my parents, there was no need to go this far. They were smashed up so bad, it seemed like overkill. "I wonder if they used some kind of iron bar. It's not a very clean method of destruction. Or maybe it was a hatchet or something."

"Why did this happen? Who did this? You think it was the killer?" Hikari said in a whisper.

The killer? Was Kanami and Akane's murderer responsible for this gruesome scene? But what was the point? What did the killer have to gain by destroying Kunagisa's equipment?

"Oooh… Poor me. I want to cry," Kunagisa said, as if really about to cry. "Hah… Well, whatever. I already sent a backup to my house and all. But still, I went to some trouble to build these. I didn't see this coming. I guess next time I'll have to make the motherboard out of unbreakable parts."

"Well, backup to the rescue, huh? At least you won't lose the software you made."

But in reality, it wasn't much of a rescue. Kunagisa's computers weren't the normal equipment used by your average pro. They were all fully homemade, so what you saw was actually worth more than what you didn't.

"Now we can't even view what was on the digital camera. It looks like the camera and the mobile memory are busted as well. Oh, it's

too horrible. Does this person think money grows on trees?"

"You're one to talk," I quipped, then thought for a moment. I snapped my fingers. As expected, the camera seemed to have been destroyed very deliberately. Which made the culprit's motive entirely clear. "I see, I see. It makes perfect sense," I muttered to myself. "Yeah, this is surprisingly easy to understand. If things had gotten any more complicated, I wouldn't have known what to do."

"What do you mean?" Hikari asked. "You know why this happened?"

"Yeah, I think so. You saw them yesterday, too, right? Kunagisa's pictures from the atelier had all been sent to the hard disk through a USB connection. Whether or not the culprit knew all that, they must've figured those images were incriminating."

The workstation and mobile memory had probably been destroyed with extra care.

Kanami's room. Those images.

"I think that's why this happened."

We hadn't told anybody about the mail or info from Chee, so the killer wouldn't have known about that, but everybody knew about the pictures. Kunagisa slumped her shoulders in realization of this fact.

"Ahh. Then I shouldn't have applied that extra protection. I never imagined anyone would resort to brute force."

"This room doesn't have a lock…" Hikari said. "I guess you were unlucky."

I patted Kunagisa on the head. "Keep your spirits up. I guess this means we can't just sit around happily waiting for this detective guy to show up." I put my hands on her shoulders and sort of half hugged her. "No more playing around, huh?"

We didn't know who the culprit was, and we didn't know the motive, either. But we did know one thing for sure: the bastard had

destroyed something precious to Tomo Kunagisa for his or her own selfish reasons.

Fine. Our gloves were coming off too, then.

“Huh? Hey. Wait, wait a second,” Hikari said as if having suddenly thought of something. “Who did this?”

“Uh, the killer, right? We don’t know who that is right now.”

“But we were all in the dining room, and then we came directly here, right? Who had the time to destroy everything like this?”

Whoa.

We had been in this room until Akari came. Then we went to the storage room where the murder had happened, but we were the last ones there. Everyone else was already gathered. Then everyone went directly to the dining room as a group.

If that was the case□or rather, that was the case. Logically, there was nobody who could have perpetrated this destruction.

“This is obviously the work of a human being, but nobody had the time to do it. What the hell?”

It didn’t make sense. Yet another mystery to worry about. Just like Kanami’s sealed room and Akane’s headless body… No.

This was different. This was a different sort of mystery. It went beyond simply trying to figure out people’s alibis and motives. It wasn’t a matter of tricks or gimmicks. It was impossibility itself.

Which meant…

“Which means maybe this is the key.”

I looked at Kunagisa. I looked at Hikari. And then I thought.

“……”

If this was the key…

Then where the hell was the door?

5

Determining that the equipment was beyond repair, we decided to continue with our planned course of action. And by that I mean Akane's burial.

We went to the storage room, placed her body on a big stretcher, and headed for the mountain woods behind the mansion. The stretcher was kept in the mansion in case of an emergency, but I doubt they had had an emergency like this in mind.

No…

Maybe they had.

This time we would bury the body alone, without a sleeping bag. Hikari took the front of the stretcher and I took the back. Despite her small frame, Hikari's length of service as a maid was apparent in her surprising upper-body strength. Kunagisa followed behind me carrying the shovel.

Carrying the back of the stretcher placed the corpse directly in my field of vision, front and center. Even being used to this sort of thing, it wasn't the most pleasurable experience in the world.

On the way, I remembered something I had meant to ask. "Hikari, was Akane wearing the same clothes when you brought the book last night?"

"Yes, they were the same," she replied. "Of course, she still had a head, too."

It wasn't the type of joke you laugh at. It was far too true to be funny.

The digital camera had been destroyed beyond all repair, so naturally we couldn't make a record of the storage room where

Akane was killed. This was probably exactly what the killer wanted.

Surely the killer was mocking us. But he or she was taking Kunagisa's memory too lightly.

"Hmm. Hmmhmm. If we assume the killer broke everything because he didn't want there to be a record of the scene where Kanami was killed, why exactly was that? Did the pictures show some concrete evidence? I don't remember anything like that."

Inside her head was an image of not only yesterday's crime scene, but also of the storage room we had just visited, just as accurate and precise as that digital camera. They hadn't called Tomo Kunagisa a child prodigy for nothing.

"Anything sticking out in your mind?"

"Uh huh. Tons of things are sticking out. I'm trying to narrow them down. Ermm, ah, right…" she began mumbling to herself. Once she had gone into this kind of state, it was best not to bother her.

I looked back over at Hikari. "So where should we bury her?"

"I suppose away from Ibuki would be best."

I couldn't have agreed more.

Walking through the mountain forest for a while, we eventually found a spot we thought would make a decent burial ground, and decided to begin digging. Yesterday we had had twice as many men; this time, it was fairly exhausting. I had hoped Shinya would be able to help us, but alas, he was on a different team. That and, for any average guy, having to bury the corpses of acquaintances two days in a row is more than a little nerve-racking.

Though I'm not that guy.

Which probably just means that I'm inferior.

"This should do."

I brushed the hair out of my face. If this were summer, I would've

been sweating like crazy. I hoisted myself out of the hole and lowered Akane's body into it. Then, a brief, silent prayer. I didn't know whether or not there was a point to such actions, but I figured it was better to do it than not.

Regardless of where or how I die, or who kills me for what reason, you won't hear a complaint out of me.

The last words I had heard out of Akane. But did she really mean it? Even being killed like this, had she crossed over to the other side like a saint, without a single gripe?

That…would be beyond me.

"I really wish we could bury her with the head," Hikari said. "Ibuki, too. Why do you suppose the killer cut the heads off anyway?"

"That's the question of the week, I guess. But we keep coming up with the same answer."

That is, We don't know.

I scooped up some dirt with the shovel and began burying Akane's body. My joints would be aching tomorrow for sure. If I still had the mental faculties to feel pain, that is. There was no saying I wouldn't be the next murder victim. The chances weren't very high, but it wasn't impossible.

A serial killing.

Maybe it was already over, with Kanami and Akane. According to the information from Kunagisa's old buddy Chee, the pair had had some sort of relationship in the past, although I couldn't say what kind, so there was always the possibility that the whole ordeal was already over. But maybe that was just optimistic thinking.

At long last, Akane's body was completely buried.

"Hikari, since we're already out here, would you mind taking me somewhere where we can see that storage room window from the outside?"

“Certainly.”

She began walking.

Kunagisa followed behind, blue hair fluttering. Speaking of which, I hadn’t put her hair up at all today. I decided to do so once we got back to her room.

As we were walking, Hikari turned to me with a serious expression. “Thank you so much.”

Not knowing what that was in regards to, I was taken aback.

“At breakfast, you stood up for me. So I wanted to thank you.”

“Oh, well, I didn’t just do it because it was you. I just hate the idea of making the same mistake again. Even putting mistakes aside, I just hate repetition, really.”

Maybe that was why my memory was so bad.

“Nyahaha, that is so you, Iichan,” Kunagisa giggled innocently. “But really you did it for Hikari, right? Cuz she’s silently right in the center of your strike zone.”

“What exactly is my strike zone?”

“She’s older than you, she’s a girl, she’s petite, she’s got long hair, she’s slender, she doesn’t wear any rings or anything, and she’s even wearing an apron dress.”

“I’ve never said anything about apron dresses.”

“Also girls who wear jeans on the bottom and nothing on top, librarian-lookin’ girls who dress in white uniforms and wear glasses, gothy girls who are taller than you and have brown hair and wear jerseys…”

“Don’t make me sound like such a freak.”

Damn. She sure was chatty.

But to be sure, Hikari was totally up my alley. In terms of speed, I preferred Akari's somewhat cutting personality, but certainly I had no problem with Hikari's gentle slowball. I suppose Teruko was some sort of disappearing magic pitch…

I don't know what the hell I'm talking about.

"Hah…" Hikari gave an ambiguous smile tinged with embarrassment. "Anyway, I wanted to thank you. My mistress can be quite…severe in these cases. Plus, unlike yesterday with Sonoyama, this time it seems like there can be no other killer. Even I couldn't help but think so. At least with Sonoyama there was the pretense that it was a sealed room, so really nobody could have been the killer. But this time□"

"Don't worry about that anymore, Hikari." I was becoming a little irritated, so I cut her off mid-sentence. "You've already thanked me, and you've already shown your sincerity, so you don't have to keep thanking me for everything."

"But□"

"If the situation had been reversed, you wouldn't have just left me there on my own, right? I think you would have done the same for me."

"But I think if that happened, you would thank me."

Well, I'll be damned.

Hikari was playing hardball.

"I think he means that you're a friend," Kunagisa said. "And we don't doubt our friends. That's why I don't think Iichan or you could be the killer."

"Friends." Hikari nodded, brimming with emotion. "I've never had friends before. I've been by my mistress's side for as long as I can remember."

"I don't have friends, either. Neither does Iichan. So we'd be happy if you'd be our friend."

Kunagisa took Hikari's hand.

Just looking at a sight like this was enough to bring a smile to your face. But realistically speaking, it would've been hard for Kunagisa and Hikari to continue a friendship, I thought. From here on out, Iria would likely need Hikari at her side, and meanwhile Kunagisa was scheduled to head back home. And once back, Kunagisa was bound to stay holed up in her home all the time.

Tomo Kunagisa was solitary.

I've heard it said that geniuses are complete unto themselves. If so, Kunagisa fit the bill. But that was just a sufficient and unnecessary condition.

And most likely, unable to analyze the situation in any other way, it was I who was the loneliest.

"Ah, it's over there. The window."

I looked around in confusion for a minute. There wasn't a window in sight.

"Oh, you mean this?" I said, pointing to the only window I could see, which stood at about the height of my chest.

"Yes, that's it."

"But the height is□"

"It looks high up from the inside, but half this place is built on a mountain, so…"

While I listened to her, I looked into the room through the window. I could make out a small puddle of blood, the wooden chair, and the door. It was without a doubt the storage room where I had been sleeping and where Akane was killed.

Wow. So part of the mansion was buried in the mountain, including this room.

"In that case, breaking in wouldn't be so hard, huh?"

“But you can’t open the window from the outside. And it doesn’t lock with just a latch, either, so you couldn’t get it to unlock by rattling it a little.”

“Well, what about the possibility that Akane opened the window on her own, letting the killer in?” Kunagisa said. “Like maybe the killer knocked to get her to open it. Y’know, like ‘Anybody home?’”

“It’s hard to believe Akane would do anything to let the killer inside. I mean, it’s Akane. Plus, this really is quite a height. It feels all the more real when you’re looking from the top down. I, for one, sure wouldn’t want to jump down from here.”

The window was the kind that tilted open, and only partially, so it didn’t look like there was much room to make a balanced jump, either. And it looked like if you didn’t make a proper landing, you could easily break a bone, or even die, if you happened to hit your head.

“But even supposing Akane had let the killer in, she could’ve easily called for help. The house phone was right by her,” I noted.

“Maybe she was attacked in her sleep…” Kunagisa said. “Oh wait, I’m an idiot. If she was sleeping she couldn’t open the window.”

“And even ignoring that fact, how would the killer get back out? Even an expert rock climber couldn’t get up a flat wall like that.”

“Teehee! Like a gecko.” Kunagisa poked her head inside the window and looked around. “Oooh, it is a dangerous drop, huh? What if the killer used rope?”

“Rope, huh? But there are no trees in this area to tie it around.”

I looked around. Whether it had been deforested or it had always been this way, the whole place was nothing but a big grass plain, and there was nothing appropriate for securing a length of rope.

“And y’know, rappelling isn’t the easiest trick in the book, either. I have some experience with it, but it’s pretty damn tough. The skin from your hands peels off and stuff.”

“Not if you wear gloves.”

“Well, yeah, but I still think it’s pretty unlikely. They might as well have brought out a ladder and stuck it through the window. That’s probably more likely anyway.”

“But a ladder wouldn’t fit through a gap this small. It would get caught halfway, and then a person couldn’t fit through.”

“Hmm, I wonder. Hikari, is there a ladder anywhere on this island?”

“Well, no…”

“What about the possibility that someone brought one with them?”

“I don’t think so. I would’ve noticed if someone brought something that big.”

“How about a rope ladder? Then they could easily hide it in their luggage, and it wouldn’t get caught in the window.”

“Iichan, you even forget stuff you said yourself? If it was a rope ladder, there wouldn’t be anything to tie it to. It would be possible if they stuck some kind of metal hook in the wall, but that would’ve left a trace. The wall looks fine as far as I can see.”

That was true. This was just common sense, not the kind of thing even worth bringing up. But for the sake of confirmation, we were discussing it anyway. It was a form of preestablished harmony.

I faced Hikari. “Have any ideas? Anything you’ve noticed?”

“Hmm, nothing in particular…” she said, approaching the window. “But assuming the killer didn’t enter through the door, the window was the only other way to break in…”

“Break in… But maybe they didn’t even have to break in.” I was just coming up with this on the spot. “The chair is over there, which means that must have been where Akane was sitting and reading. Maybe the killer made some sort of lasso, slipped it in through the window, caught it around Akane’s neck, and then pulled her up. So she was strangled to death. Then she was pulled up as far as the

window, where her head was cut off. How about that?”

Implausible? At the very least, it didn’t have any holes. The killer wouldn’t have had to sneak in through the window, or even enter the room, and still brought about the situation.

There were no holes at□“Oh no, wait, that’s no good.”

“Why not? I didn’t think it was so bad,” Hikari said, confused. “If that was the case, anyone could have done it.”

“Human bodies aren’t so light.”

For a woman, Akane wasn’t small. She was taller than average, and she looked like she must have weighed at least 110 pounds. She probably wasn’t as much as 130, but she definitely wasn’t in the 90s, either. To lift her from this height would’ve required not only a really tough rope, but some incredible arm strength to boot. I definitely couldn’t have done it. Pulling someone up this high with just two arms was a crazy feat of strength.

“Shinya’s probably the strongest one, but he’s got an alibi. And even if he’s the strongest one, that’s very relative. I don’t think even he could lift a human body by himself. Not to mention that Akane would’ve been resisting all the while.”

And while she was resisting, the house phone would have been right beside her. If she even just kicked it over, somebody would have discovered what was happening. It wouldn’t have been a very wise method.

“Plus, in that case the window would have had to be open,” Kunagisa chimed in. “But would she have really opened the window and then turned her back to it? Akane wasn’t stupid. I mean, she was smart. So she was probably being somewhat cautious.”

Indeed.

Dammit. And here I thought we were getting a little warm, but we were still on the wrong track. I felt an unpleasant sensation, like I was in some twisted dimension. It was like seeking the sum of a circle’s angles. Something was decidedly off. Something was

depressingly messed up. What the hell was I getting wrong?

I felt as if I was being given the run around, big-time.

“Well, let’s go back to the room. Seems like there’s nothing more to see here.”

Not that there was anything to see back at the room. Seemingly reluctant to leave, Kunagisa stayed gazing in through the window for a while, but finally turned and began to follow me.

“Did you spot something?”

“Uh-uh, nothing special. More important, I’m hungry.”

“Ah…”

“Then let’s go have lunch,” Hikari said.

Let’s, I nodded.

FIFTH DAY (2)
Lie

0

Don’t you have anything better to do?

1

Hikari had been completely relieved of her duties by Iria. “Instead, go help Kunagisa and the other guy,” she had been told. It was a soft way of saying, “No way in hell am I going to entrust any of the housework to the prime suspect,” or at least that was partially what she meant.

And thus, the three of us remained together even after finishing lunch.

“Would you two go on ahead of me?” I said to them on the way to Kunagisa’s room. “I want to check in with Iria. Kunagisa, hold on to this.”

I pulled a small knife out of my pocket and handed it to her.

“You’ve been walking around with something so dangerous?” Hikari said in surprise.

“A young man always carries a knife in his heart.”

“And a young woman carries a pistol,” Kunagisa joked as she took the knife. “Well, let’s go, Hikari.”

“But…”

“It’s okay, it’s okay. Let’s leave it to Iichan,” Kunagisa said, half dragging Hikari along. As long as they were together, Kunagisa wouldn’t have any trouble going upstairs. That was one of the reasons we were on a team of three.

“Well, I guess we’re going then.”

I did an about-face and began walking toward Iria’s room.

Time to request another “audience.” I gave myself some mental prep. Then I took in a deep breath.

I knocked on the thick door, waited for an answer, and then entered. Inside the room, I found Iria and Rei, as well as Akari and Teruko, which I guess I probably should’ve expected since they were a team. All of them were sitting on the sofas, elegantly sipping black tea.

Akari awkwardly avoided eye contact, as if trying to escape from me. She must have been regretting going bananas on me that morning in Kunagisa’s room. That was only natural, but it was I who was at a loss about her being so openly unwelcoming.

Iria’s mouth slowly curled into a smile. “Is something the matter, um…what was it? You’re the one who proposed that we operate in teams, and now you’re here alone? That’s a bit of a problem, now, isn’t it? Hikari is on your team□”

“Iria,” I interrupted. “Uh, you still don’t plan on contacting the police, do you?”

“Not a chance.”

A snappy answer.

An utterly cold, curt response. She was just amazing.

You’re really wonderful, Iria Akagami.

“I don’t think that’s a good thing, to be honest,” I said.

“Would you also care for some black tea?”

This was Rei. She stood up without waiting for my reply and walked over to the pot. Iria shot her a look that seemed to have some hidden meaning, but then looked back toward me.

“If the police came now, you’d be in a sticky situation yourself, don’t you think? Akane was killed because of your suggestion, after all.”

“It doesn’t matter if it would put me in a ‘sticky situation’ anymore. I live to be given the run around. More important, what about you, Iria? Iria Akagami. You might be killed, too. What do you think of that situation?”

With Rei’s invitation, I took a seat on the empty part of the couch next to Teruko. Teruko made no attempt to even look at me. Her vacant eyes stared off into space from behind her black glasses. It was like her focus was out of alignment or something. Or no, it wasn’t out of alignment. She just wasn’t focusing on me.

The black tea was good.

Iria took a vexingly long pause before answering me. “What do I think of it? Of this situation? This is major. It’s a major event. Of course that’s not all I think… But what if I ask you the same question? What do you think?”

“It’s a dangerous situation. I have no interest in sticking around with a murderer in our midst.”

And I had no interest in sticking Kunagisa in such a situation, either. I didn’t know how she felt about things, though. I had no idea. But as for me…

“Hmph. Do you think murder is a terrible thing?”

“Yes I do,” I answered promptly. “I do think that. Without question. No matter what reasons they might have, murderers are the most despicable type of human.”

“Hmm. So what would you do if you were going to be killed? I

mean, if it was kill or be killed, what would you do? Just sit there and wait to die?"

"I'd probably kill. I'm not a saint. But in that moment, I would consider myself the most despicable type of human. No matter what kind…what kind of person he or she was."

"You sound like you're speaking from experience." Iria gave me an unsavory smile. It was a wicked smile, perfectly befitting a woman of such absolute power, with such an overwhelming upper hand.

I thought she reminded me of someone.

Ah yes, Kanami. It was that same "You didn't know?" kind of smile. But why would a nongenius like Iria have a similar smile to Kanami Ibuki?

"You think murder must be punished? But imagine you set some food in front of a mouse, and every time the mouse tries to eat it, it gets an electric shock. What do you think the mouse does?"

"Mice are capable of learning, so it would probably stop trying to eat."

"Wrong. Mice are capable of learning, so it would eat the parts of the food that aren't electrified."

"Humans aren't mice."

"And mice aren't humans." Iria clapped both her hands together. "Say, as long as we're discussing this, maybe you'll answer this for me. Why is it wrong to kill people?"

It was the kind of simple question that a junior high school student might ask.

She didn't seem to be joking.

"Because it's against the law, because society functions better if you believe that, because I don't want to be killed myself."

"All of the above lack persuasive power."

“I agree. So this is my answer: there is no reason. You need a reason to kill someone. Like maybe you were pissed off, or you just wanted to kill the person or whatever, but nobody kills without some reason. But it’s not something you choose, right? To kill or not to kill? That’s not something you choose. That’s just drivel that people with a Hamlet complex spout. The instant you embrace such doubts, you’re no longer human.”

Am I who suffer noble? What a joke.

“Killing is wrong,” I said. “That’s an absolute. You don’t need a reason.”

“Hmm, is that right.” Iria nodded with blatant insincerity. “I suppose I can understand where you’re coming from. But if we knew who the killer was, this case would be closed. Once Aikawa gets here, we’ll find out who that is.”

“I don’t know this Aikawa.”

“But I do. Isn’t that enough? Akari, tell him when our dear detective is coming.”

“In three days,” Akari answered, still without making eye contact with me. “We requested Aikawa to come earlier than planned. So□”

“There you have it. If we knew who the killer was, of course you could just leave. You’re here on this island because you’re a suspect. That’s the only reason a talentless, mediocre boy such as yourself is here. Speaking of which, you didn’t have an alibi when Ibuki was killed or when Sonoyama was killed, did you?”

Thunk. I placed my still-more-than-half-full cup of tea back in its saucer, let out a deliberate sigh, and slowly rose to my feet.

“Please excuse me. I think we’re speaking completely different languages here.”

“Indeed,” she sneered. “There’s your exit.”

“Teruko, see him back to his room,” Rei said to the maid sitting next to me. “So that he’s not all alone. You shouldn’t have a

problem with that, right?”

With a quick nod, Teruko got up from the sofa. I didn’t fully understand what Rei had meant by that nor how to react to it, but nevertheless Teruko advanced out of the room on her own. I scrambled after her, leaving Iria’s room behind as well.

By the time I got out to the hallway, Teruko was already quite a ways ahead of me. What kind of an escort sped out the door ahead of the guest? As usual, I couldn’t read her at all. And it wasn’t just a matter of her doing things at her own pace. I accelerated to catch up with her.

In any case…

My conversation with Iria really hadn’t gone anywhere at all. I had more or less expected that, but still I was surprised at how quickly it had died. It seemed Iria really trusted this Aikawa. But did such amazing detectives really exist in this world?

I hoped so.

I sincerely hoped so.

No, I was wishing for it. Praying.

“Maybe that’s nonsense, too…”

I let out another sigh. I would just have to try again. It didn’t seem likely that I would be able to progress very far without the cooperation of the owner of this mansion. It was nothing to brag about, but I could be surprisingly determined. And I was a sore loser. The worst of the worst sore losers. There was no way I would give up that easily.

“ ”

Huh?

Did somebody say something just now? I could have sworn I had heard someone’s voice. I looked around the hall, but nobody was around besides Teruko and me. It must have been my imagination.

My ears were playing tricks on me. Maybe I was losing it.

Hmm… No.

The voice had come from ahead. Which meant…

There was just one other, highly unlikely possibility. I knew that it was nearly impossible, logically speaking, but could it have been? Was it possible?

“Teruko, did you say something?”

Indeed she stopped upon hearing my question.

“I said it would be better for you to just die.”

I was speechless.

It was the first time she had ever spoken in my presence, and I never would have guessed it would be a line such as “it would be better for you to just die.” That was just too much. Was she for real?

And then she turned to me and stared from behind those dark glasses, perfectly still. It was an accusing gaze, and I couldn’t help but wince. We stood like that for a while, her staring me down, but realizing I didn’t have the perseverance to beat her, I decided to just ignore her and keep on walking. As I tried to pass, she grabbed me by the arm and tightly clenched it.

Squeeze.

It felt like an electric shock had run through my elbow.

Without releasing my arm, she pulled me into a nearby room and shut the door behind her. She forced me onto the sofa. From there she sat down so that we were face-to-face, and removed her glasses.

“Those are just for show?”

“They’re so we can be told apart.”

She raised her face.

Her voice was exactly the same as Akari and Hikari's. That clear, beautiful voice.

"…Is that right."

"No, I'm lying. I just don't want to look at your face."

"…"

"No, I'm lying. I just wanted to see you make that face."

"…Can I help you with something?"

Unable to figure out her intentions, I knew that it would be bad to get swallowed up in this bizarre situation, so I tried my best to seize the initiative by asking a question. But she just sat there looking around the room without giving any response.

"I'll give you a word of advice," she suddenly said, continuing to ignore my question. It was as if she were talking to some guardian angel behind me. "You'd be best to live on your own. When you're around other people, you cause trouble for them."

"…"

The worst part was, without her glasses, she was completely indistinguishable from Akari and Hikari. Being told this kind of stuff by not only Maki but now her, too, was, to be honest, unpleasant.

I felt like I'd been betrayed.

"A person who does nothing but bother other people should just stop being a person altogether. If you can't do that, then you've got to go on living alone. That's what I think."

"Why are you saying this?"

"Because I'm the same way."

A clear answer.

Her expression showed no change. Not even a flicker.

“But,” I objected, “you’re here with other people and□”

“That’s why we have stopped being people.”

We.

Exactly who did that include?

“This morning, Akari was rude to you. I apologize.” She changed the subject without any segue. And her pale expression and her tone of voice remained unchanged.

“Why are you apologizing?”

“That was me.”

“Huh?”

She continued, oblivious to my confusion. “It wasn’t really me, but it was my body. The three of us share these three bodies. All three of us have three personalities each, and the personalities and memories coincide across us. So although the one screaming at you this morning was Akari, the body was mine.”

“You’re lying.”

“I am,” she replied with a completely straight face. What was up with this girl? She really was a disappearing magic pitch. Where I was supposed to make contact?

“Now then, enough with the chitchat.” And she thought this was just chitchat. “Let me get to the point. I don’t think it’s very wise to be yakking on and on about the police around my mistress. She can be quite patient, but everyone has a breaking point.”

“Why is Iria being so stubborn about it anyway? She says it’s to keep the peace here, but I can’t help but think there’s more to it than that.”

And hadn't the peace already been broken? She didn't seem to be interested in peace in the slightest.

"You really want to know?"

"I do."

Teruko stood up. She came over beside me. She leaned up against me. She stuck to me. Her body was all the way up on me.

"It's because…no criminal likes the police," she said, her voice completely devoid of tone or cadence. "That's why."

I was at a loss for words for a moment, not quite clear what she meant.

"Surely you've wondered why my mistress is on this island. Why do you think she's here?"

"Well, with that personality of hers□"

"She messed up."

Teruko didn't seem to be one for context, so I had no idea where the conversation was headed. How could triplets raised in the same environment have such completely different personalities? It really was like multiple personality disorder.

"Huh. What do you mean by 'messed up'?"

"Kunagisa can't handle extreme vertical motion. That's why you're here, correct?"

"Yes, that's right." I guess she didn't care much about keeping pace, either. "Is something wrong with that?"

"My mistress is the opposite," she said bluntly but smoothly. It was almost like she was reading it right out of a script. A fairly dry reading, at that. "She's on this island so that no one is at her side."

"…"

Teruko immediately continued, “Have you ever seen my mistress’s left arm? If you saw the scars all over her wrist, you would understand, too.”

The scars…on her wrist?

As dry and monotone as her voice was, it was deadly serious as well.

“It’s called…the maiming syndrome. You would know of it, yes?”

Maiming syndrome… She must have meant D.L.L.R. syndrome.

Indeed I had heard of it. A form of automatism, or should I say a high-end automatism, where the person cannot but harm oneself as well as others. At any rate, it was an exceptionally bad, impossibly unsavory, extraordinarily atrocious type of mental disorder.

In my time at the program I had read some literature about it, but I had never actually witnessed a case of it in real life, though I knew someone who had. As he had put it, “a person capable of killing without bearing any sense of guilt is truly a scary thing.”

Truly scary indeed.

Was she saying that was Iria?

But D.L.L.R. syndrome was such a rare condition that its very existence was the subject of great suspicion. It was a fairly compulsive condition, so it had an extremely low chance of manifesting. There hadn’t been a single case of it in Japan, and even in the States there had only been a small, countable sample. Wait, was this just the Law of Great Numbers at work again?

“Teruko, that’s□”

“Just as we are triplets, my mistress also has a twin, Mistress Odette.”

Iliad and Odyssey? Uh huh… “Is that right. So what’s her sister doing now?”

“She’s dead.”

“You mean it?”

“I mean it. And the one who killed Mistress Odette was none other than Mistress Iria. Do you understand? Do you understand what that means? Have you grasped the logic here? It means that you’ve just insulted my mistress with your filthy mouth. ‘No matter what reasons they might have, murderers are despicable’?”

“I didn’t really mean to□”

“Your intentions are irrelevant in this case. At any rate, I presume you understand why she won’t call the police now? If you understand, please go back to your room. And please stop making waves.”

Without another moment’s hesitation, she got up from the couch. I could tell from her disposition that this conversation was over.

But oh, oh Teruko… “Stop making waves”?

That was my line.

“Teruko!” I blurted spontaneously after her.

Contrary to my every expectation, she stopped in her tracks by the door.

“What?”

“For instance…”

For instance. For instance□

“Say there was a kid who spent the first ten years of his life locked in the basement without communicating with a single person, including his own parents. Can you imagine what that kid would grow up to be like?”

She didn’t answer.

Naturally I wasn't hoping for an actual answer. I just thought I'd try asking.

This person.

This person living quietly, plainly, bluntly.

To me, she was probably□

"You and I are totally different," she said in a somewhat harsh tone.

It was like she could read my mind. She spoke without even looking back.

"Don't you dare make me out to be one of your kind. It's disgusting and it makes me nauseous and it's an incredible nuisance."

"Sorry to hear that."

"You're the only one of your kind in the world. Not just this world, but any world. If you'd like me to put it simply: you are way out there."

"That's actually more than I wanted to hear, especially from you."

"It had to be me, because nobody else will say it." Teruko didn't look back. She continued all the same. "It seems you still think you don't understand why Himena picks on you so much, but the reason is obvious. It's because she can see what's in your heart. Nobody likes filthy things."

"…"

"I'm saying you're filthy."

"No need to repeat that… I'm fully aware of it. What's in my gut."

"Oh, are you? And yet you manage to go on living? Well, that's the spirit. That must take a lot of willpower. That's worthy of respect. Or could it be that you think there's someone out there who will like you even after you've spilled your guts? Do you worship that which might choose you even then? Then you really are way out

there.”

There was nothing to say. Her words echoed.

They were too heavy for me.

I was going to break. Brittly fall to pieces.

“How dare you barge into other people’s lives when you’re harboring such a monster inside yourself? You think that’s cute? You’re shameless. The world isn’t so forgiving. How grossly conceited you are. And that’s why□”

She opened the door. Then, for a moment, she looked back at me.

It was…

An ice-cold gaze targeted at an object of her truest heartfelt loathing.

“You should just die.”

Btam.

An inorganic sound.

The door shut.

“…”

The power drained from my body. It was like my shackles had been removed, but without the sense of liberation.

“Jeez.”

What a clown. I felt as if I’d been flattened. Completely pulverized.

“Nonsense of nonsenses, seriously…”

Left all alone, I sat and thought.

What was that? I tried to recall everything she had said. Unlike my interview with Akane the previous night, there was no theorizing

this time. There was no reasoning, no explaining, just the naked truth thrust in my face, hence…

“Oh man, that did me some damage for real.”

I shook my head.

Don’t think about it.

There are other things to be thinking about now.

I got up from the sofa and left the room. Looking around the hallway, not even Teruko’s shadow remained. She was pretty light on her feet. Wasn’t that another way in which she resembled me?

Anyway, all that mattered now was the information Teruko had left me with.

The scars on Iria’s wrist.

Her “background.” The fact that she had killed her sister…and been exiled to this island.

Maiming syndrome. Automatism.

Considering that, considering all that, it was clear why she wouldn’t call the□

“Wait a minute. Hold it, me.”

A revelation. I had seen Iria changing clothes right before my eyes yesterday. The first time she had granted me an audience. But there hadn’t been any scars on her wrists. Not that I was staring at just her limbs the whole time, but surely I would have noticed any imposing scars.

“Wait wait wait…” I stopped in my tracks, scratching my head. “Seriously… What the hell was that?”

Essentially, Teruko was a big fat liar. Just like me.

2

On the way back to Kunagisa's room, I ran into Team Maki, Shinya, and Yayoi. They were apparently on their way to eat. I was a little jealous; with Yayoi on their team, they could eat amazing food whenever they wanted. Not that I had any complaints about Hikari's cooking.

"Haha, kid. Ahahahaha. Aaaaahaha."

At the very sight of me, Maki burst into laughter. I was beyond finding this rude anymore. It was no less expected than the changing of the seasons.

"What is it this time, Maki? You're always so bustling with energy."

"Ahaha. Young man, it looks like Teruko did a real number on you. Oh, my stars. That's what you get."

"How do you know?"

"You're still asking me that? Thanks for an amusing show, Mr. Spineless. You must never get bored. I'm jealous."

For sure, Maki must have led a boring life. She knew all that had happened, all that was happening, and all that would happen. It was like watching a movie whose ending you already knew on endless mode. There was no doubt that that sucked the fun out of living.

"That's not exactly true," she toyed with me.

Was she drunk? She seemed oddly high. Did the inside of her head look like spicy cod roe?

Gah, she glared at me.

“Say, should you really be alone at a time like this in a place like this?” Shinya still looked a little blue, but he seemed to have calmed down quite a bit, and he was no longer pale. Even though it can be cruel sometimes, in the end, time really is kind to us all. “Kunagisa and Hikari must be a little edgy on their own. They’re just petite little things. And Hikari is the prime suspect right now, isn’t she? Your dear Kunagisa could be in danger.”

He seemed to be half-joking, but it was clear that he really was worried about me. I bowed to him in gratitude.

“Heehee. You’ll have to excuse us now, Mr. Half-Baked. Don’t think too hard,” Maki teased and turned her back on me.

Shinya shot her a look before telling me, “If you’re feeling responsible for Sonoyama’s death, I don’t think you should worry about it. You did everything that was in your power. You couldn’t have done anything else. You did your best.”

“Thank you so much,” I bowed and thanked him.

“Well, see you later.”

With that, Shinya turned around as well. Yayoi had given me a few odd looks that seemed to mean something, but with no more than a slight nod of her head, she went off with the other two and headed for the dining room.

“What was that about?”

There wasn’t anything suspicious per se, but something was strange.

“Eh, I guess it’s not really anything to worry about…” I muttered to myself.

Upon returning to the room, I found Kunagisa nose-deep in busted-up computer parts while Hikari was doing some cleaning. Word had it that Hikari was a total neatfreak. Come to think of it, she did always seem to be cleaning. I supposed it was one form of workaholism. Was there not a single normal person on this island?

“Hey hey, Iichan. You’re just in time.”

“For what?”

“Putting my hair up.”

“Gotcha.” I approached her from behind. I decided to give her a whole bunch of mini-braids and began braiding together small portions of her blue hair.

“Ahhhh,” she sighed with pleasure.

“Tomo, is it okay if I clean up that mess?”

“Don’t call it a mess. I can still use some of these parts, so I’m retrieving them now. You gotta reuse stuff. Recycle, recycle, for Mother Earth! Recycling’s important, y’know. Hmm. But what should I do? Maybe I can make a secret weapon to stop that killer.”

She sure knew how to keep her chin up. Not that I wanted to be like her, but you had to admire her positive thinking. Even if it was just because she had never known negative emotions.

Sigh.

“…Oh, right. Hikari, do you have a memo pad or something?” I asked. “And something to write with?”

“They’re in that cabinet. Do you need them?”

“I’d like to write up an outline of the current situation.”

We had made an alibi chart yesterday, but the data had been smashed to smithereens along with the computers. I wanted to create a new chart that included updated information.

“I see,” Hikari said and headed to the cabinet.

“Ah, by the way, Tomo, I forgot to tell you. Remember that painting? I figured out what was strange about it.”

“Hmm? Oh yeah, you were saying something about that, weren’t you? So what was it, Iichan?”

“It was the watch.”

“The watch?”

Yes, the watch. When I was modeling for the painting in Kanami’s atelier, I hadn’t been wearing it. It was broken and I’d given it to Kunagisa to repair. So there wasn’t anything on my wrist.

And yet.

On the canvas, a watch was painted on my wrist.

“Hunh. Don’t you think it’s just an error?” Kunagisa looked puzzled for just a moment but reverted back to her usual expression and asked the eminently sensible question. “I can’t imagine it’s very important.”

“Well, yeah, maybe, but…”

“Which?”

“How about a subject and predicate?”

“The watch display. Was it blank? Or was it a mirror image like after I fixed it?”

“Oh… Well, actually, I face the display inward like this, so you can’t tell.”

“Mmm,” she nodded. After a moment’s thought, she said, “Yeah, I think it’s just an error. More important, I thought of a clue, maybe. Akane’s murder case was…or rather, her headless body was, errr…”

“Errr?”

“Her hand.” Kunagisa tilted her head to the side and folded her arms. “Well, not her hand, but her fingers… There was something unnatural, I mean really unnatural about them, I think… Aw, man, my memory capacity has hit its peak. It feels like there’s a big mosaic in my head. Hey, Hikari, did you notice anything weird about her hand or fingers?”

“Hmm…”

Hikari, who had returned at some point, sat down on the carpet next to Kunagisa so that she was facing me.

“Sorry for the wait. Here’s some paper and a pen.”

“Thanks.”

I took the supplies from her and, while recalling the chart we had made yesterday, whipped up a new alibi list for the Kanami Ibuki and Akane Sonoyama murders, including everyone on the island.

Kanami Ibuki

murdered

□□□

Akane Sonoyama

before quake: X

after quake: X

murdered

Tomo Kunagisa

before quake: O

(Iichan, Hikari, Maki, Shinya)

after quake: X

O (can’t go down stairs alone)

Yayoi Sashirono

before quake: O (Iria, Rei)

after quake: X

X (asleep)

Akari Chiga

before quake: Δ (Teruko)

after quake: X

O (on the mainland)

Hikari Chiga

before quake: O

(Iichan, Tomo, Maki, Shinya)

after quake: X

X

Teruko Chiga

before quake: Δ (Akari)

after quake: X

X (on the mainland)

Shinya Sakaki

before quake: O

(Iichan, Tomo, Maki, Hikari)

after quake: O (Maki)

O (Maki)

Rei Handa

before quake: O (Iria, Yayoi)

after quake: Δ (Iria)

Δ (Iria)

Maki Himena

before quake: O

(Iichan, Tomo, Hikari, Shinya)

after quake: O (Shinya)

O (Shinya)

Iria Akagami

before quake: O (Rei, Yayoi)

after quake: Δ (Rei)

Δ (Rei)

There. Something like that.

Staring at the chart, I let out a sigh.

“Alibis. But y’know, this doesn’t really mean all that much, does it? We’ve pretty much shelved the idea of it being a cooperative crime up until now, but if you consider that possibility, this chart doesn’t mean squat. Especially looking at these two- and three-person alibi testimonies.”

There was also the possibility that people other than the killer had lied just so they wouldn’t be suspected, and when you took that into consideration, the information was even harder to swallow.

Well aware of the futility of it all, I decided nonetheless to write up a similar summary outline of the murder cases themselves.

FIRST INCIDENT

Victim

Kanami Ibuki

Conditions

Sealed room

River of paint (solved)

Time of incident

Night

Presumably after the

earthquake

Notes

Decapitated corpse

Killer unknown

SECOND INCIDENT

Victim

Akane Sonoyama

Conditions

Sealed room

Open window in a high

location (unsolved)

Time of incident

Between 2:00 a.m. and 9:30 a.m.

Notes

Decapitated corpse

“And…killer unknown.”

I finished writing and put the pen down.

“You’re forgetting about the third incident, Iichan,” Kunagisa immediately objected. “The Poor Kunagisa Incident.”

“Oh, right. It pales in comparison, but that’s a mystery, too.”

“Don’t say that! To me this is a greater tragedy than having my head cut off! If they were going to go this far, I wish they’d cut my head off instead!”

“Okay, okay.” I picked up the pen again.

THIRD INCIDENT

Victim

Tomo Kunagisa(’s computers)

Conditions

Non-sealed room

No lock, enterable by anyone

Time of incident

Between 10:00 a.m. and end of

breakfast

But everybody in mansion was

together. Time-locked?

Notes

Destructor’s goal presumed to

be images of Kanami Ibuki’s

murder scene

“A time-locked room…”

The first incident involved a room sealed by a river of paint. The second, a room sealed by an unreachable window. A room sealed in terms of height. And the third incident was sealed in terms of time.

“The second, third, and fourth dimension,” remarked Kunagisa.

“That sure makes it sound like a crime of enormous scope. Say, Hikari, this question pretty much completely undermines all of our assumptions, but…is it possible there are other people on this island?”

“No,” she stated confidently. “There’s only one spot on the whole island where ships can dock, and we’ve been living here for quite some time, so I think I can say that for certain.”

“I see…”

But if that were really true, then it would have been absolutely impossible for the damage to have happened to Kunagisa’s computers. With enough wit and wisdom, a person could feasibly get through a sealed plane or conquer height, but time was the one dominion impenetrable by man.

“Well, then there must be some kind of trick to that, too,” Kunagisa said. “Some sort of remote-control trick. Mmm, but this is obviously the work of a human being.”

“Hikari, is it possible that one or two people maybe slipped away in the midst of all the confusion of discovering the body? I mean, with a headless dead body right before our eyes, maybe someone took advantage of the situation and walked off while we were distracted.”

“I…don’t think so.”

Hikari was unconvinced. Even I couldn’t help but scratch my head at the idea, and I was the one who had brought it up. In reality, we probably would’ve noticed if someone had disappeared from the room.

I attempted a summary: “First incident. Anybody could have done it. That is, if you consider the possibility of a cooperative crime, but we’ve at least figured out how they did it, and we know it wasn’t really a ‘locked room’ after all. Now, second incident. For that locked room, we have no idea how they did it.”

“But I alone could have,” amended Hikari.

I nodded. “And then the third incident. Nobody could have done it. Moreover, no possible method even exists.” The difficulty level of the cases was rapidly cranking up. It didn’t bode well for the next incident… “Jeez, what the hell kind of a cycle is this?”

“Well, I don’t think that part was intentional… Though it doesn’t feel right to write it all off as a coincidence, either,” Kunagisa said.

“For the time being, let’s stop thinking about all the disheartening stuff,” I proposed. “Alibis. Locked rooms. Tricks, gimmicks, setups, fakes. Whatever. Let’s just agree that someone is using some unimaginable method to fool us all.”

“A virtual machine.”

“Yeah, that.”

I guess.

They often say in old mystery novels that it’s harder to make a puzzle than to solve one, but I don’t think that’s true. Creating a puzzle or trick or what have you is far easier. In creating a puzzle, you’re free to display events from whatever angle you please, completely catering to your own convenience. Solving the puzzle, on the other hand, can only be done from that one presented angle.

So for now we just had to place the issues aside.

“But don’t you think we should at least consider alibis? That’s pretty much all the information we have right now,” Hikari said. “If we start making emotionally charged arguments, everyone will seem suspicious. I mean, didn’t Sonoyama become the prime suspect after Ibuki was murdered because they hated each other so much? But look at what happened because of that.”

“Yeaaah… But it really would’ve made sense if Akane was the killer.”

And now Akane was dead, too.

“Then how about a scenario where Sonoyama killed Ibuki, and then someone killed her in revenge?”

“If that were the case, then I guess Shinya would be the most likely to have killed her. He was Kanami’s caretaker and closest friend.”

“But Shinya had an alibi,” Kunagisa pointed out. “Even if you set that aside, how would he have known Akane killed her?”

“Maybe he didn’t, maybe he just had a hunch. Mistaken revenge may not happen every day, but it’s not unprecedented. If you think about it, what’s the deal with Shinya and Maki? They’ve got alibis two days in a row. In the middle of the night. Don’t you think their having alibis is conversely kind of suspicious?”

“Suspcious…” echoed Hikari. “Maybe they’re synchronizing stories in secret. But you know, Himena doesn’t really seem the type.”

Maki Himena. The unspeakable fortune-teller with superhuman abilities. The absolute absolute, able to gaze upon the inner workings of men’s minds and to hear any and all things. Something about her resembled Kunagisa, a weird□

“What, Iichan? Have you fallen for Maki or something?”

“Geez, don’t say that. But you know, a spaced-out woman like her can’t be expected to have the best common sense.”

Man, this really was all futile. I felt like we had already considered every possibility. It was like we were stuck once and for all. What else was there left to think about?

“It kind of seems like maybe Akane knew she was going to be killed,” I offered.

“Huh?” Hikari leaned forward in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“It just seemed that way. Last night, I had a conversation with her through the door, and at the time, well, it was like she was at peace. She was quoting Ryokan and stuff. It was really out of character.”

“Hmm, I wonder if she knew who the killer was,” Kunagisa let drop solemnly.

Indeed, that was a possibility. She was Akane Sonoyama of the ER3 System's Seven Fools. Even without conducting an investigation, if she had a hunch about who the killer was, it was pretty much sure to be right.

"By the way, Hikari. I was just talking with Teruko□"

"What?!" She was even more shocked than before, as if I'd just made some ungodly remark. No, not shocked, exactly. It was more like she was thinking, Why would you tell me such a blatant lie?! "Y-You mean…Teruko talked?"

"Yeah. I was pretty surprised, too, but the real problem was what she said."

I explained to Hikari and Kunagisa what Teruko had told me. Of course I cut out the last part. I was never one to go around boasting about my own faults.

"So what does it mean, Hikari? How much of it was true?"

Hikari wore a completely perplexed expression as she muddled out a vague response. "Um," she muttered. "Um, well. Um…"

"Akari was ranting about something strange this morning as well. 'I'm so tired of this' or something like that. What was she talking about?"

Hikari went on stumbling over a response. At last, she looked up at me, seeming to have made up her mind. Even then, her eyes darted back and forth as she deliberated for another moment. Finally, she opened her mouth.

"…It's all true."

Huh. Admittedly, that was not the answer I expected.

This time it was my turn to be speechless. All…of what? What did she just say?

"I'll talk because it's come to this, and because I choose to trust you. And because I owe you." Hikari fell silent once again, and then,

looking more lost than ever, resumed at last, “Yes, my mistress is technically a criminal. We serve her in full awareness of that.”

“And that’s why you won’t call the police?”

“We just work for her. We don’t do anything else. Ever since coming to this island, various things have happened. That’s how we eventually met Aikawa, whom you’ve been hearing about.”

Various things? What various things?

The incident on this island.

Come to think of it… Come to think of it, the other night…

“Hey, Tomo.”

“Yeah, Iichan?”

“I seem to recall you saying something the other night along the lines of ‘I’m interested in the incident that happened on this island,’ but is this just another figment of my awesome memory?”

“Nope.”

“Then you knew?”

“Yup.” She nodded with a giggle. “It’s pretty well-known info. Lots of people know, but nobody ever talks about it. Not a lot of people are looking to make enemies with the Akagami Foundation.”

So, Kunagisa’s hobbies hadn’t changed since the good old days. Maybe the passing of five years wasn’t enough to alter her nature.

“Actually, it was mixed in with the rest of Chee’s information, but I thought it might be better to keep it a secret from you.”

“Why?”

“Cuz I knew you’d make that face.”

Aha.

Good grief…

I was drained.

Matter-of-factly, or more like falteringly and painfully, Hikari continued. “Once we started planning this ‘salon,’ my mistress was able to calm down a bit, but…I can understand Akari’s frustration. But you know, this is our job.”

A job, huh? If she really meant that, it was quite a statement. I was honestly impressed. I respected any person who lived solely to fulfill their role, regardless of what that role was. Because it was something I could never do.

So Hikari, too, had felt resigned in the deepest depths of her abyss.

“I see… So that’s the deal.”

But what did that mean? If the killer knew all this, knew Iria couldn’t call the police, then…

Then the remarkable boldness, audaciousness, and fearlessness of his or her actions all suddenly made sense.

“Okay, Hikari…”

Just as I was about to ask for the details of this famous island incident, there came a knock at the door.

It was Yayoi.

3

“I have to go to the bathroom.”

That’s what Yayoi had told Maki and Shinya in the middle of lunch before breaking off from her team and coming to us. It was a pretty typical and hackneyed lie, and Maki could read minds anyway, and even under-the-weather Shinya probably saw through it, but one look at Yayoi’s sickly pale expression, and they probably wouldn’t have called her a liar if she said she was heading to the Isle of Dread on turtleback.

She sat down on the sofa and said nothing.

She seemed strangely wary of Hikari’s presence. Maybe she, too, thought Hikari was the killer. It wasn’t such an unexpected assumption, to be honest.

It didn’t look like this was going anywhere on its own, so I went ahead and asked, “Can we assume you came here because you wanted to tell us something, Yayoi?”

“Yes,” she nodded weakly. “Um, you two are doing some investigating, right?”

“Well, that’s the plan. It’s become a personal matter at this point, after all,” I said, looking at the computers in the corner of the room. Make that former computers. “What about it?”

“Well, if you’re investigating, I suppose the facts need to be accurate.”

“Yeah, well, naturally.”

“If you proceeded from here with inaccurate information, there could be a third incident.”

“Fourth.”

We ignored Kunagisa’s protest. “That’s right, Yayoi. That’s the situation. Um, Yayoi, I don’t really understand what it is you’re trying to say. It looks like you came here to help us, but am I wrong? Did you come here because you don’t like being on a team with Shinya and Maki?”

“No, that’s not it,” Yayoi mumbled. “It’s just… I-I told a lie I can’t take back.”

“A lie?”

“Yes. That night… I really was with Iria talking. It was only up until the earthquake, but that much is an honest fact,” she said. “But Handa… Handa wasn’t there.”

Hikari’s face went stiff.

Rei□Rei Handa.

It was suddenly clear why Yayoi seemed so nervous around Hikari and why she had seemed so unnaturally detached since the other day, staying holed up in her room all the time.

The ice was melting…

Ah ha. The other morning during the alibi check, Iria had said herself that she, Yayoi, and Rei were together. Everyone else was questioned one by one, but when Yayoi’s turn came, Iria spoke for her. I had thought this was simply because they had been together, but it seemed that wasn’t why after all.

Iria…

Iria Akagami was covering for Rei Handa.

Yayoi slumped down with her shoulders drooped. It was like she had been relieved of a terrible burden or freed of a curse.

“Why?”

Why had she kept silent about such an important detail up until now? It was a question I was in no position to ask. This was Iria's island and Iria's mansion, she was the mistress here, it was she who had invited Yayoi, and she was, after all, Iria Akagami. If Iria said, "I was with Yayoi and Rei," who could argue? Who could just call her a liar?

Like anyone could say that.

"I didn't think it was a big deal at the time," Yayoi finally said. "I just figured she was looking out for her own. But thanks to that, Akane became the only person without an alibi, and she was locked away and…killed."

She was speaking like a burst dam. I sat and listened in silence. Kunagisa and Hikari did likewise.

"And then regarding last night, Iria said she was with Rei again. All night long. But how do ever I believe that? She said they were discussing what to do from here on, but why would that take all night?"

"Well, it's possible."

"I don't think so. Just because someone lied the first time doesn't mean they lied a second time, but the chances are pretty high, right? And Hikari"—Yayoi glared over at the maid—"is one of Iria's inner circle, too, but Iria didn't even try to cover for her, did she? Why is that? Why would she cover for Rei but not for Hikari? Isn't it because she knew there was no need to cover for Hikari? Isn't it, conversely, because she knows who the killer is?"

"Are you saying Rei is the killer?" I was surprised by this. I didn't think the conversation was heading in this direction, but Yayoi seemed absolutely serious. "Certainly her alibi is rather dubious now—that is, if we can believe what you're saying."

"It's the truth. Whether you believe me or not, it's the truth," she declared.

Hikari looked like she wanted to take issue with this, but something

or other seemed to be bothering her, and she remained silent. She chewed on her lip with a painful expression.

“Let’s just hold on a second here,” I said.

If Rei didn’t have an alibi that night, how did that change things? Maybe not all that much, but the fact that Iria had lied was unarguably huge.

Rei wasn’t in Iria’s room that night. That meant they weren’t together after the earthquake, either.

Which meant…

“Hurrm. Hey, Yayoi.”

“What is it, Kunagisa?”

“Why do you think Rei is the killer? She’s the head maid. She’s the confidante. She’s a hotshot. She’s closer to Iria than Hikari and the others are. So maybe Iria just covered for her out of kindness. And we really don’t know if she was lying the second time, even if she was lying the first time. And if Rei really is the murderer, then that means Iria knows about it, right? Why would she cover for□”

“How about if Iria ordered the murder?”

Gulp, someone swallowed audibly. For all I knew, it could have been me.

“I don’t think that’s the case,” Kunagisa disagreed. “Kanami and Akane were both invited here as guests. What’s the point in bringing people over and then killing them?”

“What if she invited them here to kill them?” Yayoi pressed on. “Iria invited people here. And then those people were killed. If you look at it that way, it’s not so unthinkable.”

Was Iria using Rei in a plot to kill those two, as well as possibly a third, fourth, and fifth person? It seemed like a highly unrealistic notion, but there was no evidence against it.

Yeah. And on that note, hadn't I just heard, from Teruko and Hikari, the evidence for it?

Rei Handa.

The head maid.

Hikari, Akari, and Teruko's boss, she was closest to Iria. So how about it? Was that the answer? Was that what it all came down to?

Iria Akagami.

Named after that great ancient Greek classic epic, Homer's Iliad, the work that told of the war with Troy over Helen. All of the characters in the epic think that the gods are pulling their strings. Was that it? If that was the answer…

As I thought, Yayoi continued on. "Do you know why I was called here?"

"Because you're a genius?"

She grimaced. "Well, Ibuki was a painter□a magnificent artist. Sonoyama was a scholar□fine. Himena is a fortuneteller□whatever. Kunagisa's an engineer, yes? That's wonderful. But I'm a chef. Unless she's some kind of gourmet cuisine nut, why would she call such a person here? I don't think cooking is really that special."

I was silent. Hearing Yayoi, herself, say that, there was no possible response I could give.

"And do you know why Ibuki and Sonoyama had their heads cut off?"

"That's a sudden change in topic."

"No, it's not," Yayoi said with a stern expression and tone to match. "You are what you eat. It's an idea that exists in Chinese cuisine. If your liver is ailing, you should eat liver. If your stomach is ailing, eat stomachs. In other words, if part of you isn't working right, you should eat that same thing. I'm sure you've heard of this?"

“Hang on now, Yayoi. That…”

That… Such a notion…

“Who called Ibuki and Sonoyama to this island? Who?!” Yayoi screamed. Her voice reverberated throughout the room. The sound lingered in my ears. But I was so confused at this point I didn’t even care.

Hold on… Hold on a minute, here. Did she mean what I thought she meant? Just wait a second. Hold the phone. I’m begging you, just give me a little time.

“I’ll say it one more time. No, I’ll say it as many times as it takes. Why would the killer cut off their heads? Why would the killer take the heads with her? Where did she take them? And who was it who invited those women here? Who brought these renowned geniuses here? What was inside those heads the killer carried off?”

If jewels are stolen from a murder scene, it probably means the killer was after the jewels. If cash is missing, he must’ve been after cash. Such thinking was just plain common sense.

And in this case, it was the victims’ heads that were missing.

Yayoi continued. “Why was I invited here? Why was I, not an artist or a scholar or a fortune-teller or an engineer but a mere chef, invited to this island? Why have I been given special treatment and allowed to stay here indefinitely?”

She’d barely squeezed out those words. It was the voice of someone seeking salvation.

She had probably been brooding over this. From the moment she had failed to testify truthfully. From before Sonoyama was killed, and indeed the half-day following her death as well, Yayoi had probably been thinking about it nonstop.

Yayoi turned toward Hikari and emitted another hopeless scream. “What… Just what am I going to be made to do?”

Gulp□someone swallowed again.

This time it was definitely me.

Was it possible? Such a notion… Wasn't the acceptance of such a notion itself unforgivable?

If that was really what was going on, why now? It wasn't like this whole salon thing had just started. If that was Iria's little game, she could've done this in the past□

No.

The five geniuses on this island right now were all world-class, top specialists in their respective fields. Had Iria been waiting for this exact timing?

"That's impossible!" Hikari denied emphatically. It was like she had exploded after holding it in until now. "The idea that my mistress would do such an inhuman thing, such a cruel thing now…"

Now.

I'm so tired of this.

The past.

Various things. So tired. Now. Why now? I'm so tired of this. Please stop making waves. I'm so tired. Tired, so tired. Not when I'm so tired.

But Yayoi didn't relent.

"I've been keeping an eye on Handa since yesterday morning," she said. "You know how the longer you watch someone, the more you start to notice their similarities to you, and you start to feel their humanity? Their humanness? A sense of affinity. You know? 'Oh, this person is just like me.' I felt that way with Iria. She's human, just like me. She lied, but she's still a human being. But Handa… She frightens me. How could I not be afraid of someone whose whole life is an act?"

"That's…" Hikari began with her head hung.
"That's□that's□that's…"

But it seemed there was no end to that sentence. Even so, she was trying desperately to defend her mistress. In accordance with her duties. It was too heartbreaking□to the point that it was laughable.

“I see. Yayoi, I basically understand what you’re trying to say. You’re trying to say this…”

I tried my best to force my way in between them, but it was hopeless. Yayoi continued her relentless questioning.

“Akari and Teruko were on the mainland calling on a master detective? Who can prove that? Who’s the one who won’t let us contact the police? Who’s the one who won’t let us leave this island? Maybe you were left out of the plans, Hikari, but where’s the proof of that? Iria made you out to be the prime suspect. Is there any proof that you aren’t just a scapegoat to shake things up? No, maybe you’re in cahoots with Iria and running interference against Kunagisa, and□”

“Please stop this. Yayoi, that’s enough,” I said quietly. “Please stop insulting our friend. Kunagisa and I both dislike getting angry. But we’re not afraid to do what we must.”

My gaze was probably fairly cold, and Yayoi shivered for a moment at the sight of it. She had the same look of uneasiness that she had when she entered the room.

“I’m scared. I’m scared, I’m scared. I’m just scared.”

“Yes, I understand that.”

“This is a solitary island. There’s nowhere to run. If this is what I think it is, maybe I won’t be killed. You weren’t invited here as a genius, so you might not be killed, either. But your dear friend Kunagisa is in danger. Not even God can guarantee that she won’t be the next one to have her shoulders flattened. The time for leisurely investigations has already… I mean, I think we need to do something fast. I didn’t come here to hiss at Hikari. I came here because Kunagisa is an engineer. Can you operate a boat, by any chance? If so, let’s get out of here on that cruiser and□”

“Hold on.” I held up my right hand.

Yayoi looked up at me with a confused expression. Hikari eyed me curiously as well. Only Kunagisa remained staring off into space, a somewhat stupid expression on her face. I was probably making the same face.

Um, where was I? Why did I interrupt Yayoi? Oh, right.

“Please say that again.”

“Huh?”

“That thing you said. Say it again.”

Yayoi tilted her head a bit. “If so, let’s get out of here on that cruiser□”

“Not that.”

“Can you operate a boat, by any chance?”

“No, not that, either.”

“Uh, I didn’t come here to…?”

“No. Not that. Something grabbed me, but that wasn’t it. Before that.”

“I don’t remember.”

“Well, remember. What did you say before that?”

“We need to do something fast… The time for leisurely investigations has□”

“No. We already understand that. We need to do something fast? That’s practically a catchphrase. I don’t care about the stuff we already know. I think it was a little before you said that.”

“That’s all I got. That’s as far as I can recall.”

“Tomo!” I looked over at Kunagisa. “You remember, right?”

“Yup,” she replied with a brisk nod. She slashed her hand across the front of her neck. “I’m gonna get my shoulders flattened.”

“Bingo.”

Yes. That. It had grabbed me. Was that because it suggested something I’d rather not imagine? Nope. It wasn’t nearly that trite. It was something totally, completely different.

Now, this. This was the key.

The Rosetta Stone.

“Um…”

“Silence please. I’m thinking. I think I’m on the right track. Definitely. It’s simpler than the geography of Kyoto or Sapporo. We have a hypothesis and conclusion now, so all that’s left to do is prove it.”

I thought.

Kunagisa was thinking, too.

All the ingredients were probably there. I sensed this. Or we already had all the ingredients a while ago. They were all lined up in front of my face, so much so that I could have arrived at the truth as soon as Kunagisa’s computers were smashed. The third case wasn’t the key, but it was another ingredient.

And now I had the key. This time, for sure.

And just as any door will open once you’ve obtained the key, so, too, would I reach the solution. It was like a zero-sum game. Like a simple maze with a foolproof winning strategy.

Kunagisa probably had it, too.

The mountain of sand was almost complete.

“Seriously. This is what I call nonsense…”

And. After a while…

“Is that it?” I muttered.

But that was…

“No way… That can’t be right.”

That couldn’t be it.

Like that could possibly be it.

What sort of logic was that?

But there were no contradictions, it was all consistent, it all made sense□it was complete. There was no other possibility left… It didn’t look like it could take any more sand…

I felt uneasy. Something was off. Like with an exam’s final question, no matter how many times I checked. I definitely wasn’t wrong, but I felt uneasy nonetheless. It was that kind of feeling. I couldn’t shake it.

What was…this vague sickly feeling?

“What do you think, Tomo?”

“Hurrm,” she groaned. “There’s no ‘what do you think’ about it. There’s only one possible train of thought. So that’s why the fingers bothered me. But that means…”

It seemed Kunagisa was feeling a similar anxiety. Yayoi and Hikari stared at the two of us like we were Martians. Or maybe Venusians. I guess that’s a trivial matter either way.

“But that has to be it, huh?” Kunagisa was the first to bow to reality. “That’s the only possibility, so that must be it.”

“Yeah. If there’s only one possibility, it’s got to be the truth, no matter how unbelievable it seems.”

It looked as if we had to rely on selective thinking in the end. If

Akane heard about it she surely would have gotten angry, but we no longer had to worry about that. If this was in fact a case of serial murder committed by the same culprit, there was only one possibility. One possibility meant its odds were one hundred percent.

Okay.

Time to just accept it.

I didn't like it at all, but reality was like that, the truth was like that.

And those were just my nonsensical sentiments anyway.

"Looks like we've reached an agreement, Iichan," Kunagisa said. "So what now?"

"What now, indeed. Hmm, this place is a little too big…" I continued my pondering. I was more cut out for something like this than Kunagisa was. I may not have been any good at actual shogi, but I aced shogi problems. "All right… Yayoi, Hikari, could I ask for a little bit of your cooperation?"

"Huh?"

A lovely duo of a question mark.

I rose to my feet.

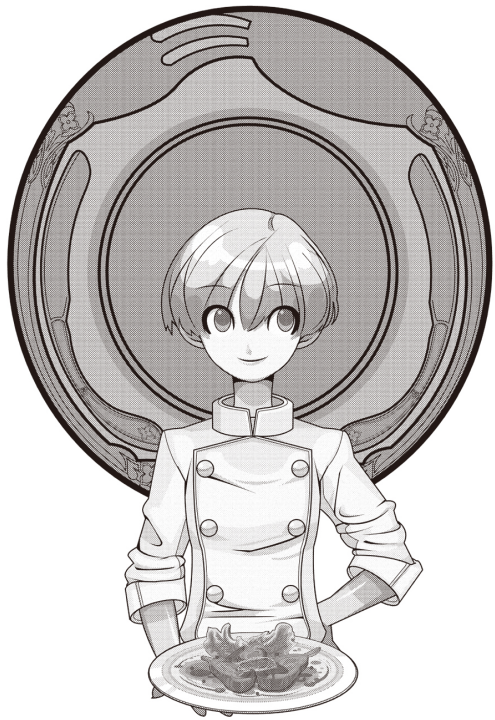
"The top of the first inning is finally over. We're down by a lot of runs, but it's not quite a called game yet. We got that third out at last, it's the bottom of the inning, and we're stepping up to the plate."

"Leadoff hitter, first baseman Yayoi. Batting second, center fielder Hikari. Batting third, catcher me. Cleanup, pitcher Iichan."

Poink, Kunagisa jumped up off the bed and flashed a smile bright as the blue sky.

"It's our turn."

FIFTH DAY (3)
A Crow's Wet Feathers



YAYOI SASHIRONO
Genius Chef

0

End it.

1

By the way.

In Russian, “a crow’s wet feathers” supposedly means “the peak of despair.” Given that, you could romantically describe this island as the ultimate destination for those in despair. Just as the opposite of love isn’t hate, but indifference, the opposite of hope isn’t despair. Surely the opposite of hope is apathetic acceptance of all things. An absolutely sure apathy that allows you to approve of all things, to say, “Yes, that’s fine”—that is the opposite of hope.

Everything is here, so what more do you need?

The far side of that smoothed-out average line.

A metaphorical place that is the outcome of any and all emotions running their course. The distant shore of the lake of non-interference that we all view at some point or another with longing eyes laced with envy. That domain, on the reverse side of taboos, that boasts an expanse wedded to reality with a big equals sign and that maintains a density equal to nothingness.

To reach said domain requires many sacrifices. What’s more, it was a one-way ticket with no guarantees.

However.

Even so.

There are people who reach it□whether by some mistake, or by being successful.

Kanami Ibuki, Akane Sonoyama, Yayoi Sashirono, Maki Himena.

Iria Akagami, Akari Chiga, Hikari Chiga, Teruko Chiga, Rei Handa.

And Tomo Kunagisa…

This is all probably cheap sentiment. Nothing but boring, worthless nonsense. The worst part of it is that this nonsense had a continuation.

Really now, what kind of a clown was I?

“Have you figured anything out?”

The fifth dinner assembly.

Teruko had personal chores to attend to, so her seat was empty, but the other nine of us were all gathered together. Nine people. Until the day before yesterday, just two days ago, there were twelve of us surrounding this round table.

“Do I have to ask again? Kunagisa, you and he are still doing some investigating, correct? Well, have you figured anything out?” Iria repeated.

She seemed to be having an awful lot of fun. I’m sure she was. Of course it was fun.

Because she had probably created a whole world in her head. Because this island, this Wet Crow’s Feather Island, was, for her, the world itself.

“Shall I ask again?”

“We know absolutely, positively nothing at all,” I answered. “What about it? Does that inconvenience you?”

“Oh, no. I was just thinking, I guess there’s nothing we can do without someone who’s a pro, after all,” Iria said dreamily. “Well, I guess the best thing then is to continue operating in teams like this for the next three days.”

“Three days?” Shinya said. “I must say, you seem to be expecting quite a bit from this person. Just what kind of person is this Aikawa, anyway? How did you meet?”

“That’s a private matter,” Iria replied with a wry smile. “But I will tell you what kind of person. Hmm, what should I say? A very frightening person. Well, that’s what you’d expect from humanity’s strongest contractor. But also incredibly intelligent. I’m sure this case will be solved in no time. Ha ha, I really can’t wait.”

A master detective, huh?

Solving the case before the detective even came on stage probably disqualified me as a supporting character. I entertained that self-deprecating thought. But my life was on the line here, and there were various complicated circumstances. I couldn’t just sit around and wait for the lead actor to show up. It was his own fault for being late.

“Keheheh,” Maki snickered next to me.

She seemed to be having an awful lot of fun as well. I didn’t know whether she was reading my thoughts or laughing at the farce to come. Surely both, but they probably weren’t the only reasons she was laughing. Really, just who was this woman who was able to continue chortling even after chugging down everything in the world?

Maybe she was deserving of respect.

I looked away from her.

“I’m told Aikawa will be here in the afternoon three days from now at the latest. After that, I’m sure everything will soon be□”

As Iria expounded over this detective of hers, the sound of overturning flatware and clattering porcelain interrupted her, along with a loud voice.

“Enough!”

It was Yayoi.

Rising from her seat, she used her right arm to shove off the table all of the food she herself had made. She then proceeded to take the now dirty tablecloth and yank it, causing all the dishes to come toppling off the table and shatter. A grating string of noise stretched through the dining room.

“Enough of this!”

She banged her hands on the table.

“Ma’am…”

In an effort to settle her down, Hikari rose from her seat as well and approached her, but Yayoi gave her a violent shove.

“What is all this? Give me a break! I want out of this farce! A detective? A locked room? Decapitated corpses? This isn’t some mystery novel. Don’t you realize people are being killed? Why the hell are you eating during this kind of discussion? Their heads were cut off! Don’t eat my food while you’re talking about such a thing! You must all be crazy if you’re able to stay so calm about all this! Why don’t you care that people were killed? You’re all disgusting! Since when was it okay to kill people in this country?”

“Ma’am…” Hikari said from the floor. “Please calm down.”

“You’re the killer!” Yayoi screamed even louder. “It’s obvious! We already know that! You were the only one with a key to that storage room, and you visited Sonoyama in the middle of the night, didn’t you? That’s when you killed her! And you must have killed Kanami Ibuki, too!”

“You don’t have any proof. You shouldn’t say such things without any proof, Yayoi.” I tried my best to stay cool as I reprimanded her.

“There’s no proof that Hikari is the murder□”

“Proof? I don’t give a hoot about proof!”

“But there’s no reason Hikari would have done such a thing.”

“It’s not like you can expect to understand how a maniac’s mind works! She’s probably going to use it in some kind of ritual! To call upon some god! No more, no more, no more! Why are you trying to come near me? You think you’ll take my head next? Never!”

“Yayoi, please calm down.”

“I’m plenty calm! I’m fine! You are all the crazy ones! You’re all nuts! You’re all disgusting! I’ve had enough! Grownups getting together to discuss, what? I can’t even talk to you! What language are you all speaking? A detective? A locked room? Decapitations? What the hell language is that? Am I the only one from Earth here? If that’s the case then I’ll just leave right now. I don’t want to be on this crazy island anymore. I don’t want to talk to you people!”

Bam! She slammed the table once again.

“I don’t trust any of you. From now on, I’m staying in my room. I’m barricading myself in. Call me when you’re ready to send me back to the mainland! Otherwise, leave me the hell alone! Don’t come near me!”

Having spewn those words, Yayoi stormed off toward the dining room exit.

Ma’am, Hikari called once more, but Yayoi didn’t even look back, and eventually she was gone from sight.

A long, awkward silence.

“Oh my,” Iria eventually said with a bitter smile and a shrug. “And here I thought she was so polite. What a temper. Phew,” she sighed, before continuing, “Aikawa is going to all the trouble to come here, I can’t just send one of the suspects home. Hikari, this is your responsibility. Go do something to convince her.”

“Yes,” Hikari said with her head down. “Understood, my mistress.”

“Oh, dinner is all ruined. Akari, will you hurry and make us something? Now just where has Teruko gone at a time like this?”

Indeed, dinner was ruined just as Iria said, but this much of a stage direction was a necessary expense, so to speak. It wasn’t my money, and of course you shouldn’t waste food, but I wasn’t the one who had done it anyway. It was Yayoi, the one who had made the food in the first place.

Kunagisa stared at the fallen, smashed dishes wistfully. Not the food, but the dishes. Perhaps she was thinking of her destroyed computers, which were the same white color.

“Hey, batting third, catcher.”

“Mmm?” Kunagisa looked at me. “What, Iichan?”

“I better get going. I’ll leave this to you.”

“Gotcha,” she nodded.

I rose from my seat and headed for the door.

I could hear the sound of trouble brewing behind me. I turned to find Kunagisa climbing over the table and jumping Shinya. It was admittedly a slightly enviable sight for me, but for now, I had to let it go.

Besides…

I couldn’t take Kunagisa with me.

Running down the hall with one eye closed, I climbed the stairs and eventually spotted Yayoi when I neared her room. She was leaning up against the wall, a vacant look on her face.

She looked up at me and sighed with relief. “How was I?”

“You gave a star performance.”

“Performance, huh? It was more than half genuine,” she said, shaking her head and walking with me. “But is it really possible? For that person to be the killer?”

“You checked yourself, right?”

“True, the smell was right, but…I don’t have that much faith in my sense of smell. I’m not a dog, after all.”

“Close enough, though.”

“That’s not a compliment, you know.”

“Right. Kanami told me something similar. It’s not a compliment if you say, ‘You’re like a such and such.’”

Well, what woman wouldn’t be offended after being compared to a dog? I went ahead and apologized.

We arrived at the door to Yayoi’s room.

“So, what do we do from here?” she asked.

“Please go back to the dining room. It’s dangerous here.”

“Then why are you doing it?” she inquired, simply expressing a doubt. “I feel like there must be another way. This is just my speculation, but it feels like you deliberately picked the most dangerous possible option.”

“…”

“In this world there are people who die from eating too much and people who die from starvation, and the former is overwhelmingly more common. But it seems you’re the latter type.”

“Don’t overestimate me.”

“That wasn’t a compliment.”

With that she gave me a nod and slowly headed back the way we had come.

“Dangerous…” I mumbled to myself. Of course, I was well aware of this. I had complete understanding of the dangers I faced when I decided to do this, which I suppose really did make me the starving-to-death type.

Now there’s some nonsense for you.

After a brief mental preparation, I slowly, gently opened the door to Yayoi’s room.

It was dark inside. Unable to see much of anything□

I advanced a step.

Swoosh.

The sound of sliced air.

I did a forward roll and slipped into the room. Then I rose to one knee and opened the eye that I’d kept shut. This way I could make out the inside of the room at least a little bit.

That person closed the door behind me. I could see the person’s face clearly and, at that moment, learned that my hypothesis had been correct. My opponent wore a slight look of surprise, but only held it for a second before brandishing a hatchet□ a hatchet!□at me.

Silent.

My attacker didn’t say a word.

Huff. Regulating my breathing, I rose to my feet.

Although I’d laid this trap, it had been quite some time since I had done any acrobatics. Not that I had been bad at it, but my skills had definitely dulled in the few months since coming back to Japan.

As if realizing the immediate need to settle this, my attacker moved first, shuffling toward me. With Kunagisa suppressing Shinya, someone would eventually come and save me as long as I could buy some time. There was no need to go on the offensive. In fact, I wanted to get out of there, but my attacker was standing between

me and the door, so that probably would've posed quite a challenge.

For now, I just had to focus on dodging attacks. This sort of passive thinking had me written all over it, but it was no good. In focusing my gaze entirely on my attacker's hatchet, I completely neglected to pay any attention to my feet.

My attacker faked with the hatchet, then came at me with a leg sweep. It made a glorious connection. Unable even to brace for the fall, I slammed into the carpet facing up. My attacker proceeded to mount me and pin down my shoulders. It all happened in a single instant.

"…"

The match was essentially over. Maybe I should have spent those mornings running marathons instead of just going for walks. Or maybe I should have continued going to a dojo even after I got back to Japan.

"Man…"

Ah well, truth be told, it didn't really make much difference whether I was killed or not. At this point, Kunagisa had probably already explained everything to the others, and Yayoi had already returned to the dining room as well. Either way, my attacker couldn't escape. I may have lost the game and match, but it wasn't like they'd pitched a perfect game.

So this was fine.

Now then, the hatchet.

With that hatchet.

"Die."

My attacker's cold, familiar voice.

I noticed I had completely given up.

Was this the feeling?

I wondered why. Why was I giving up my life so easily?

Didn't I want to live?

It wasn't that I wanted to die, but I didn't want to live, either. Life was a big hassle, but going out of my way to die was a bother, too.

Was there nothing important to me? Nothing I wanted? Nothing I wanted to protect? Is that why I was so ready to give up?

"No."

That wasn't it.

It was because even if I died here, it would trouble no one. It wouldn't trouble Kunagisa.

Maki.

Did you know this was coming? If so, I suppose I'm grateful that you didn't tell me anything at all. I felt like I understood why Maki, who knew all, had said nothing.

To die when your time is up.

Though I wasn't quite in that frame of mind yet.

Indeed, just as Teruko said, I needed to die. Seriously.

Yeah?

But the hatchet wasn't coming down. It was raised way up in the air, but just stayed there. Looking up suspiciously at my attacker's face, I saw not a sadistic expression, but rather a grimace. My attacker was desperately struggling to bring down the hatchet.

"You don't close your eyes, do you?"

There was another person!

It wasn't the voice of the person on top of me. I couldn't see from

where I was, but this third person must have grabbed the hatchet while it was up in the air and refused to let go.

Who was it? Had Yayoi come to save me? Had Kunagisa followed me here? But neither possibility seemed the case.

The third person snatched away the hatchet and in the same instant delivered a beautiful, truly glorious low kick to my attacker's completely open side. Unable to take the blow, my attacker rolled off me and slammed into the nearby sofa, but in no time was back on two feet and face-to-face with the third person.

In one fell swoop, I had become a mere spectator.

At this point, for some reason, the third person threw away the hatchet. And here there was such a golden opportunity to use it. Could it have been a gesture of sportsmanship? At a time like this?

Unlike when fighting me, my attacker didn't attempt to pounce recklessly. But there was a time limit here. If this didn't get settled fast, there was a chance Kunagisa would finish explaining everything and bring the others here.

But this third person didn't repeat my mistake, and with a tupping sound against the floor, sprang toward my attacker, covering as much as six feet in a single stride. In a Japanese kenpo-style motion, the momentum from the leap was channeled into a straight punch. Instead of dodging back or to the side, my attacker instead leaned diagonally, evading the punch and getting under the third person's guard at the same time. My attacker then grabbed the third person by the throat, but the latter delivered another straight punch without even trying to elude the clutch. My attacker, still in offensive mode, was unable to dodge. The punch connected straight with the heart.

"Guhh…"

My attacker let out a groan but refused to release the third person's throat, and almost effortlessly, slid past the side and delivered a back kick to the calf.

The third person was afloat in the air.

It appeared my attacker intended to use this opportunity for a forceful slam. Watching from the sidelines, even I thought this was the end. But it didn't end. The third person used my attacker's arm as a pivot, swung up, and shifted in midair, so that when they both fell to the floor, my attacker's arm was in a lock. It was like a seesawing judo match.

A split second.

The surprisingly light, almost anticlimactic sound of a bone breaking echoed through the dark room.

The third person released the arm and stood up. My attacker followed suit and began to stand up, too, but before managing to get up all the way, took a merciless kick to the already seemingly broken arm and proceeded to fly through the air, over a sofa. The sound of a glass table shattering. Then my attacker's body rolled onto the sofa on the other side.

Pheuuu. Still breathing calmly, the third person assumed a stance.

We had a winner.

I was utterly speechless.

At last, the third person faced me and without so much as a smirk, said, "When you're about to die, I think you should close your eyes."

Sapped of all strength, I muttered as though to myself, "I thought guys like me could just go and die…"

"Oh, that?" A tilt of the head. "That was a lie," Teruko said.

Slowly shaking my head, I held my hand out to her. I figured the chances were about fifty-fifty, but she grabbed my hand and pulled me to my feet.

"Why are you here?" I asked her.

“No reason. It was mere necessity.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t mind me. Just simple nonsense.”

That, too? That was my line.

Good grief…

“Thank you.”

Having pulled me back to my feet, Teruko quickly let go of my hand and looked at me with those out-of-focus eyes. “No need to thank me. More importantly…” A brief pause. “There’s something that’s been bothering me.”

“Say what?”

That was a fairly heavy statement to make. What was she about to say? I couldn’t even imagine.

Dark.

My eyes had completely adjusted to the darkness, but I still couldn’t read Teruko’s expression.

It was like my own heart.

It was like the hearts of other people.

“Your question from this afternoon,” Teruko said, with that same old pale tone and cold gaze. “I know you were speaking metaphorically, but…were you talking about Kunagisa, or did you mean yourself?”

The child locked in the basement.

Deprived of all communication for ten years.

“Uhm…”

I tried to touch Teruko’s hand again, for no reason at all.

For an instant, our fingers touched.

Then, the moment they separated…

An eardrum-shattering sound. It was as if a shock wave had run through my entire body.

Teruko's body slumped into mine.

Like deadweight.

I held on to her as she rested her whole weight on me. But there was no time to stand there and savor the warm touch of her expectedly light body. My eyes were glued to the sofa.

Or, to be more specific…

To her, sitting there holding a handgun.

Sitting there, imperiously.

My eyes were glued.

"……"

It was a black gun, a relatively popular model. I had even seen a few overseas. I sure didn't expect to see one in Japan, though. She had a Glock?

That she might possess a gun wasn't open to doubt. But why hadn't she used it until now? …That was easy. No matter how big this mansion was, it wasn't big enough to stop the sound of a gunshot from reaching every corner of it. In other words, this was probably the final ace up her sleeve. It was an illegal move, the absolutely forbidden method.

In which case…

In which case, having made her use it, the day was mine. I still had my ace…if only because I'd let my chance to use it slip away. But this time, it really was the end.

“… □ . …”

Hence this was the end, continued.

The final scene, recouped.

“□ … , □ .”

A voice.

A faint voice.

Then, the gun barrel turned toward me.

“ □” she said. “ .”

I wondered what she was saying.

Maybe the gun blast had ruptured my eardrums, and her voice didn’t reach me. No, my eardrums were probably okay, just momentarily numb. But in a situation like this, that meant the same thing. It didn’t look as if she were going to wait for my hearing to come back.

What had she said? It kind of bothered me.

Checkmate.

Goodbye. Such a fool. What were you trying to do? Dying here… What have you lived for?

Those were the kinds of things she might have said to me. Or no, maybe she hadn’t said anything at all.

Either way, there is no meaning in lines you can’t hear. Just like there is no meaning in feelings you don’t express.

Out of steam, I gazed at her.

Over Teruko’s shoulder.

Past the gun’s sights.

“Ah…”

In the end.

In the end, this was it for me.

I hadn’t hoped for anyone to come conveniently to my rescue, of course… This was pretty much what I expected to happen. I didn’t mean to get Teruko involved, but aside from that, everything had gone more or less according to plan.

That’s because my one and only plan was to not involve Kunagisa. Nothing else mattered. It didn’t, really.

I was apathetic and indifferent.

No before.

No after.

Having received life? Can’t say I recall.

The feeling of being alive? Who gives a damn.

My reality is but a synonym for fantasy, and that’s certainly not the antonym for dream.

Already.

Teruko’s bo / dy rest / ing on / me. My throb / bing ankle / pain. My para / lyzed train of thought. My break / ing values. My melt / ing ethics. My col / laps / ing morals. Kana / mi’s neck. Akane / ’s neck. The tru / th of the ca / se. The culprit. / The kill / er. Seri / al killer.

Her segmenting.

None of it mattered now. I would forgive it all.

So…

Pull that trigger□and end it please.

K-chink.

The sound of the gun cocking.

A sound I had heard enough times abroad.

And so□finally□here.

“Iichan!”

The sound of the door slamming open.

Light pierced the room with such ferocity that my eyes stopped functioning for a moment. But I didn’t need my visual organs to know who was there. Even with my stunned eardrums, her voice alone reached me.

But I could barely believe it.

Tomo Kunagisa was standing there alone.

Ridiculous. That wasn’t possible. I had left her on the first floor so she couldn’t do this. I had left her on the first floor because she was unable to climb stairs alone. She wasn’t supposed to be able to come here alone.

But she was indeed alone.

With tears in her eyes.

She wore a terribly exhausted expression.

She was panting. Clutching her chest. She looked as if she were ready to collapse at any moment.

But she forced herself to remain standing.

Alone.

“This…”

Wait a sec. This couldn’t be. Someone had to be with her. If no one were with her, it would have been impossible for her to climb that spiral staircase. Maybe one or two steps, but not this.

It was impossible.

And yet, despite it being impossible, had she actually come up here alone?

Up here.

To be sure, it wasn’t physically impossible. But compulsive disorders aren’t something to be taken lightly. They aren’t so minor that you can just conquer them with willpower. I know for a fact that defying one’s own subconscious is no walk in the park.

However…

However, having heard the gunshot, Kunagisa, despite it being deathly agonizing, despite it being so painful that in a worst-case scenario she really might have died□

Forgetting even to bring someone along□

Suppressing the urge to vomit, clutching her own heart□

Forcing those reluctant legs to keep moving, lashing at her own fear-ridden soul□

With that heart much too fragile for living□

Enduring the anguish of the depths of hell□

She’d come up to where I was?

Casting all things aside.

Tomo Kunagisa.

For me.

“Why?”

It was too much.

It was heartbreaking to the point of brutality.

Really how much of a clown was I?

This emotion.

This painful emotion.

What was the name for it?

“Why are you…”

Why are you always, always…

Shaking me up?

You.

Really. Since back then.

Nothing’s changed.

“Hah…”

The woman smoothly pointed the muzzle away from me and at Kunagisa.

“Hey!”

What are you doing? You were going to shoot me. What need is there to point your gun that away? No such necessity exists or do you have no use for such things? Are things like necessity and reality nonexistent in that convenient world you live in?

The light.

Gradually my eyes were adjusting. Hers were probably doing the

same. Kunagisa, however, who unlike us was adapting to the dark, not the light, couldn't yet make out my attacker. Dark adaptation takes longer than light adaptation. Consequently, if she were to shoot now, there was no way Kunagisa would dodge.

I started to stand up.

But by the time I was on my feet, it would be too late. There was no point. There was no way I could make it to Kunagisa in time. I couldn't outrun a bullet. Even if I could, there would be no point. I couldn't die right before Kunagisa's eyes. I was too late. I was too late, just as I'd been five years ago. Just like always.

In which case…

There was nothing I could□

"Oh."

It seemed Kunagisa had spotted me. Without even casting a glance at the handgun, without letting my attacker even enter her field of vision, she stuck a finger out at me and grinned.

"Thank God. You're okay, Iichan."

With that smile. That selfless smile. That ragged smile.

With Tomo Kunagisa, who was completely oblivious to the circumstances.

Truly.

I□

"I'm in love with this girl."

Yes.

It was something I had always known.

It was so obvious to me there was never a need to put it into words. Because there was no need for words between us.

It was self-evident.

I'd been aware from long ago.

From the instant I had met her, I had chosen Tomo Kunagisa.

To the point that I didn't care about anything else.

I□

Didn't need to be loved or chosen.

"So please don't do it," I begged the woman.

She remained motionless for a while, but then□

"Heh. Heheh…" She spun the gun around and pointed it at the ground. She continued laughing for a while. "Heheheheh… Haahaha…"

Like she was truly having a ball. Singsong laughter.

Dragging my feet, I made my way over to Kunagisa and hugged her by the shoulders. Her body had become thoroughly hot. That was enough to discern just how much she had struggled to make it here. I held Kunagisa to shield her and trained my eyes back on my attacker.

She was looking back at us. Looking at us holding on to each other.

"I've still got some complaints, but well…" she opened her mouth, "this time, just getting to hear a guy like you speak such an innocent line will do, I guess. Those were words I couldn't hear from you last night, after all."

Saying so cynically, Akane Sonoyama tossed the gun aside.

2

“Wow, you’ve got a huge bruise, Iichan.”

With my pant leg rolled up, Kunagisa caressed my ankle. The blue-haired goon probably didn’t realize how much that hurt. Hikari had brought me a compress from somewhere, so I stuck it on. There was that sensation of my body temperature being drained.

You had to love that feeling.

“Akane was so~o tough. Not that she ever looked like much of a pushover,” Kunagisa said. “Didn’t you know, Iichan?”

“Why would I? Who could’ve known one of the Seven Fools would turn out to be so freaking tough? It wasn’t some video game.”

She was a complete force to be reckoned with. I hadn’t expected her to be so overwhelmingly tough, and I certainly hadn’t expected her to have a handgun prepared. I had had a number of brushes with death by now, but this was by far the most dangerous.

“If Teruko hadn’t come to my rescue, things would’ve gotten really bad.”

“You have to be careful. That body doesn’t belong to you alone.”

“Dunno about that…”

Since the showdown, we had entered a phase of treating the wounded, dictated by common sense as the primary concern. At the time, I hadn’t thought anything of it, but after a while, the damage from that initial leg sweep became much more apparent, so I was now undergoing treatment in Kunagisa’s room.

“You hit your back as well, didn’t you? Did it hurt?” asked Hikari. “Please take care. Akane was in the karate club in high school, you

know?”

“I think I’ve heard that before…”

“She even participated in the national tournament.”

Man, tell me that stuff.

“Yes, but apparently she only won five matches.”

“You only need five matches to win the national tournament.”

As for Akane’s wounds, first there was her broken right arm. Then there was that first kick, which had apparently broken four ribs. Even in that early phase of the showdown she had suffered a major wound, yet she was still able to hold her own like that. It was no small feat.

Akari and Teruko were attending to her.

As for Teruko, she had bled a little from Akane’s nails digging into her throat but had suffered no other notable wounds. At the time of that gunshot, I assumed that the bullet had hit her square in the back, but in fact it hadn’t hit her at all. I thought she’d fallen into my arms from the force of being shot, but it was actually the result of her dodging the bullet. Apparently, she had reacted to the sound of the gun being cocked.

What was she, one of Charlie’s Angels?

Not to mention that, afterward, she was playing dead.

“Actually, that’s not quite right,” Hikari said in defense of her sister. “I’m sure she was shielding you.”

“Shielding?” Indeed, depending on how you looked at it, that wasn’t impossible. “So you’re saying she was risking her life for me?”

“No, her life wasn’t particularly in danger. Teruko’s apron dress is bulletproof.”

“Bulletproof, you say?”

She wasn’t an angel, she was a combat maid.

Where did you go, reality?

“Yes. Spectra is sewn into her clothes. Unlike Kevlar, Spectra can withstand any number of shots without weakening. And it’s light so you don’t get sweaty. Teruko is nigh invincible at short range, but she’s mindful about long-range defense. See how long the skirt is on this apron dress? She says it works like an aikido hakama.”

“……” It sounded like a terrible joke, but it was hard to tell based on Hikari’s expression. Maybe it was better to just let it go. “But why is Teruko so strong? Are you that strong, too?” I asked, inching away from her.

“No, Teruko is our mistress’s SP, basically. Our roles are fundamentally different. Up to now, you’ve never seen all three of us doing the same job, have you?”

Come to think of it, it did seem as if Hikari and Akari were always the ones at work. As a former participant in the ER3 program, maybe it was unforgivable that I hadn’t noticed until now. Yeah, it sounded pretty bad.

“But I’m glad she rescued you. I’m sure you’ve noticed by now that she can be awfully cold. Saving you is one thing, but putting herself in harm’s way… It almost doesn’t make sense.”

“Yeah, about that. Why did she do it?”

“Well, she’s a whimsical girl.”

Just like everyone else here.

But it wasn’t completely beyond my comprehension. I still didn’t know for sure how Teruko felt, but insofar as she was somebody to me, I was no doubt somebody to her.

I bet she simply wanted to throw a question at me.

“If you’ll allow my nonsense…”

Come to think of it, she had seemed abnormally strong when she grabbed my arm that afternoon, but I never would have imagined that that was some kind of foreshadowing.

“It seems like your back and hips are okay. You didn’t hit your head, did you? Well then, that’s a wrap,” Hikari said.

Sticking close to me, she began to massage my shoulders. Which was sort of like heaven.

“Now then, shall we head back to the dining room?”

And that was hell.

Right. The noninjured guests had all been left waiting for Kunagisa and me with bated breath in the dining room.

Unbelievably. Terrifyingly.

“Tomo, you go on alone. These injuries are way worse than I thought. I don’t think I can go.”

“Whatever. But y’know, Iichan, this is your chance to look good in front of Akari. If you’re smooth, you might get something out of it.”

“Oh my, do you have Akari on the mind? She loves smart people, you know.”

Kunagisa and Hikari were happily double-teaming me. What were they, middle school students?

“Tomo, you know how bad I am at that stuff. Do they really need to have it spelled out for them? They could just use their own heads.”

“Iichan, didn’t you do this kind of thing abroad? Lectures or presentations or what have you?”

“Well, yeah, but it was hell every time. They would always bitch at me, like ‘Quit talking around the subject’ or ‘You’re being too vague’ or ‘Nobody’s interested in your problems.’ Ah, okay, okay. I

should just do it, huh? Fine."

"Such enthusiasm," Kunagisa said with a vague smirk. "Come on, you'll get in trouble. You have to be more cheerful about this. I know that's probably impossible for you, but anyway, let's get going. Tie my hair up first."

"Huh? You don't like it that way?"

"It feels like my head is being pulled on. One or two tails is better after all."

"Huh, and here I liked it."

"Tomo, would you like me to do it?" offered Hikari.

"Uh-uh," Kunagisa shook her head. "Putting my hair up is Iichan's job."

Yes'm. I redid her hair, and…

Our preparations were complete.

"Okay…let's go."

Slowly the gates of hell opened. I was feeling quite heavy-footed, and it wasn't just because of my injuries.

"What a buncha nonsense," I muttered as I arrived in the dining room. Everyone besides Akane Sonoyama, whose wounds were severe, was gathered together.

That of course included Shinya.

As if he had already given up, as if a burden had been taken off his shoulders, he had a calm air about him as he watched us walk through the door.

Maki sneered at me, making me think I was about to be harassed again, but she remained silent.

Lined up on the table was the remade meal Yayoi had prepared

while I was being treated. Possibly because she felt safe now, this time the food was even fancier.

Akari still avoided eye contact with me, awkwardly. Teruko had bandages wrapped around her neck.

Rei watched over the scene in complete silence.

And then there was Iria Akagami. She was looking at me with challenging eyes.

“Well then, shall we have you begin?” she said to me as I took my seat. “What was all this?”

“I’ll explain. Akane Sonoyama of the ER3’s Seven Fools is the killer, and Kanami Ibuki’s caretaker, Shinya Sakaki over there, is her accomplice.”

Silence. “And?”

“That’s it.”

“Take up thirty minutes,” Iria insisted unreasonably. “The first thing I want you to explain is what Sonoyama was doing there.”

“That’s easy. Yayoi flew out of the dining room, right? Since she was about to be the next person to be somewhere by herself, Akane saw it as an opportunity to kill her and waited in Yayoi’s room.”

The idea had been to have Akane’s plan backfire, but instead things had backfired on me and Teruko had saved me. And ultimately I had had to rely on Akane’s kindness.

That hatchet she had brandished at me. Surely it had beheaded before.

“I’m very grateful to Teruko.”

“No, I don’t mean that. You know what I mean. Wasn’t Sonoyama killed? In that locked storage room?”

“As we saw, she’s alive.” I shrugged. “Assuming she doesn’t have a

twin, I think we can all agree that it was Akane."

"So what about that headless body in the storage room?"

"Well, Akane is alive, so that wasn't her body. That's just logical thinking."

"It was someone else's corpse?"

"If you see a headless body, beware of switching. It's a cardinal rule of detective novels, right? I'm sure your darling detective would say the same thing."

Iria tilted her head at me as if to show that this was beyond her comprehension. "Um, just wait a second. Let me think." She did want to think it through on her own. I was a bit impressed by her spirit. "Umm…"

"Well, in the meantime, may I?" Shinya raised his hand. "I've got a question for you."

I don't mind, I nodded. I thought for sure he'd ask when I realized the truth of the case or how I figured out the killer, but Shinya's query was totally unexpected.

"Is that wound on your foot okay?"

"…Yes. It's made a bruise, though."

"Really? So she didn't break it. That woman…" Shinya snorted self-mockingly. "Or maybe she couldn't break it, though that's not like her… Or is it?"

I wasn't sure what all his mumbling meant.

"No good," Iria capitulated. "I don't get it at all. There was really a switch?"

"There was. Kunagisa's computers were destroyed, okay? The third incident. Nobody could have done that. Literally, precisely nobody. Everybody served as everybody else's witness, so alibis and accomplices weren't even a matter of concern. We were all

watching one another the whole time. Nobody could have done it. Nobody who was there. Therefore, only someone who wasn't there could have done it. That's just logical thinking."

"I gathered that much," Iria said. "You don't need to keep emphasizing that it's logical. You're kind of a smart aleck, aren't you? So whose headless body was that in the storage room? Everybody is here. There isn't a single person who would or could take Sonoyama's place. It's doesn't make sense."

"Well, it doesn't, but…" I decided to give her an easy-to-understand analogy. "Do you know this quiz? Or actually, it's more like a trick or con, but anyway…"

I pulled out the alibi chart and turned it over to the back. There I drew a big rectangle, then drew nine lines through it. In other words, a ten-box chart.

"What is that?" Iria asked. "How is it relevant?"

"Please pretend these are telephone booths. Ten telephone booths. Now let's put eleven people in them."

"Phone booths?"

"Oh, I mean, they're just boxes. They could be rooms."

"Ten rooms."

Yup, I nodded.

Incidentally, this was a magic trick I had picked up from a book I perused at the bookstore while in elementary school.

"Okay, so let's say A tries to enter the first box, but a second person enters it before him." I wrote an X in the first box. "Now for the third person." I wrote an X in the next box. "The fourth person." I wrote yet another X in the next box. "The fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth people. The ninth person, and the tenth person. So now we've got ten people in boxes. But there's still one box leftover. So let's stick that first guy, A, in there." I drew an X in the final box. "And so we've fit eleven people in ten boxes. Do you get it?"

“That’s silly,” Iria complained. “The first person never entered the box, so it was off by one person.”

“Yes, that’s correct. It’s a rudimentary trick that anyone can figure out with a little thought. But if done with the right timing and skill, nobody notices.”

“Yes, they do.”

“They don’t. We didn’t.”

“I don’t have any idea what you’re talking about. And this is all off-topic. I’m asking whose body that was in the storage room. Everybody is gathered here. No matter how you look at it, that makes us one person short. Or are you saying there was a thirteenth person on this island?”

“Not possible. There were twelve people on this island. Let’s assume that’s a given.”

“Well then, who was it?”

“As of now, there are eleven people alive on this island. Iria Akagami, Akari Chiga, Hikari Chiga, Teruko Chiga, Rei Handa, Maki Himena, Yayoi Sashirono, and Tomo Kunagisa. Then there’s Shinya Sakaki and Akane Sonoyama. Then, finally, there’s me. So the answer should be clear.”

I allowed a brief pause.

“It was Kanami Ibuki.”

3

“With the corpse wrapped up in a sleeping bag, it didn’t get dirty even when we buried it. After we left the burial site, Shinya dug Kanami’s body back up. Then, with body in tow, he headed for the storage room window. From the outside, I mean. He knocked on the window and Akane opened it from the inside. In went the body, and they made the switch. It’s as simple as that.”

Taking a look over the group to see their reaction, especially Shinya’s, I continued.

“It was strange. When we went to bury Kanami’s body, Shinya brought a sleeping bag along. It was a coffin. But hold the phone there a second. Why would he have a sleeping bag? Maybe if this was a camping trip, but nobody would bring a sleeping bag when they’ve been invited to a mansion. So maybe it was already at the mansion to begin with? See, that’s what I had thought. I thought Iria had offered it to him for the sake of the burial. Certainly in a mansion like this, a mansion that offers beds with canopies even in the guest rooms, it’s a little unnatural for there to be sleeping bags lying around, but it’s not impossible. So that’s what I thought. But the second time, when Akane’s corpse□actually Kanami’s corpse again□was discovered, Hikari brought us a stretcher. Is there some reason you would offer a sleeping bag for the first person but not for the second? Not likely. If there was a reason, Hikari would’ve told me. And so one assumption crumbles. There were no sleeping bags here after all. Shinya must have brought one himself even though this isn’t camping. It’s as if he knew from the start he would need something in which to bury a body. He knew that he couldn’t let the body get dirty.”

“So they…recycled the body?”

“Yes. Exactly. Shinya and Akane murdered Kanami and from her created a new phantom corpse. It’s as simple as that.”

“But there was blood in the storage room,” Iria said. “If that body was a day old, there wouldn’t have been blood.”

“There is no way for us to determine whether that’s Akane’s blood. The police could. Indeed, if the police were here, this crazy incident would be unfeasible. But you didn’t want to call the police. That wasn’t hard to predict. Due to certain circumstances, you couldn’t call them. Knowing that, Akane was free to assume that even if there was an incident, the police wouldn’t come. The blood could have been from a blood bank or even from an animal. We’ll have to ask Akane or Shinya to find out.”

But Shinya remained silent, refusing to answer. I let it be and continued. “In the same sense, if the police had been here, they could have told us that the body was a day old already. But we’re not professionals. All we know is the difference between dead and alive. Maybe after ten days we’d be able to discern the age of the corpse, and maybe a little faster in midsummer, but this isn’t the summer. This is the season of cherry blossoms.”

“So they changed the corpse’s clothes?”

“Yes. Akane called Hikari to her room in the middle of the night just to show her what she was wearing. Kanami’s body was already in the room at that time. That room has an inward-opening door, so all she had to do was hide the body behind it. As long as she came for the meal herself, Hikari wouldn’t enter the room. This was likely the riskiest part of the whole ploy. If there was ever a point where Akane felt that she was going out on a limb, it was this scene. But she had to go out on a limb. As I said before, she did it so that she could make us all think Kanami’s body was her, Akane. Also, to narrow down the time of the murder and to give her accomplice, Shinya, a solid alibi.”

That night, Shinya was with Maki drinking the whole night. Maki had invited him, but supposing she hadn’t, he probably would’ve invited her. Or it’s even possible that he would have invited us instead of Maki. Of course, now that all was said and done, that was just a trivial detail.

“That’s also why they smashed Kunagisa’s PCs. The PCs and digital

camera contained images. Images of Kanami's corpse. If we carefully compared those images with Akane's corpse in the storage room, there was a chance that we would realize they were in fact the same body."

"Actually, that's true," Kunagisa said. "Something had been bothering me. The hand, or the fingers. You know? It's not like Kanami and Akane could have the same fingerprints."

She let out a sigh. It seemed she was disappointed in herself for not noticing right off the bat. Everyone else probably thought she was joking, but I knew she wasn't.

Sheesh.

"But why would they do such a thing?"

"There are altogether too many possibilities as far as that's concerned, but in my opinion she was trying to erase her own existence. Akane created a phantom 'thirteenth person' by using the same body twice, and in so doing succeeded in erasing her own existence. There are plenty of hiding places around here. It's a huge mansion, and many of the rooms aren't locked. And she could always stay outside the mansion."

"Why would she need to erase her own existence?"

"That hardly takes any thinking. There's no thinking required at all. If she became a victim, if she herself was murdered, she would no longer be watched. She would be free to move about, beyond the confines of thought and reason, like some kind of invisible woman. In which case, breaking Kunagisa's computers, for example, became a simple task. Even causing a fourth incident, such as another murder, would have been simple. But again, we won't know for sure what they had planned until Akane or Shinya□"

"We were going to kill everyone."

This time Shinya was gracious enough to answer. He spoke with a coolness that told of his complete surrender. He spoke with indifference.

“Everyone on this island. But to do so, she had to remove herself. It was obvious that her ability to maneuver would be curtailed, either by the forming of teams or by having everyone stay together in one place. She had to remove herself from the circle.”

And once she was on the outside, she would just start picking people off one at a time, starting with the easiest prey. Shinya let out a weak chuckle.

“That Akane, she did such a good job of removing herself from the party. I never would’ve thought she wouldn’t even be able to kill a single person. I thought she’d at least get through half of you.”

“Would you like to explain the rest of it, Shinya?”

“No,” he shook his head weakly. “I’ll leave it all to you. That’s your role here. Your job.”

I gave a silent nod in reply. “Well then, I don’t think I need to explain the first sealed room at this point, do I? That was just a trick to distract us. They just needed to buy time until the second incident. It might not have been specifically planned to go down that way, but rather just a coincidental product of the Law of Great Numbers. Maybe the earthquake just happened to occur and she thought of it right then. Of course murder was in her heart all along, but maybe she only decided on a specific plan once the earthquake occurred. Supposing that was the case, it was some incredibly quick thinking. You can’t help but be impressed. Anyway, there was an earthquake. Then Shinya called. However, it wasn’t Kanami on the other end, but Akane. Then Akane killed Kanami. Shinya said Kanami had said ‘the paint spilled,’ but that, too, was a trick. He used vague wording so that even if the trick was exposed, he could weasel out of it. Even I was tricked by that.”

“Keheh,” Shinya laughed. “That was just a coincidence.”

“I dunno, there’s too much of a significant difference… I can’t speak to it, but anyway, Akane killed Kanami. Then she put together that ‘sealed room.’ By intentionally spilling the paint.”

“So at least I wasn’t wrong when I said at the outset that Sonoyama

is the killer."

"That's right, Iria. Highly possible meant just that. But that's all it meant. Because Akane had created that sealed room, we couldn't say for certain. Of course, that was the whole point of the sealed room. To put herself under a perfect level of suspicion, to be doubted but not ascertained as the culprit, she created a sealed room. Then she was imprisoned in the storage room…"

Granted, I was the one who had suggested it, but even if I hadn't said anything, Shinya surely would have. There were only so many rooms with locking doors, so it would have been easy for them to guess where she would be held, and there had already been plenty of time for them to get to know the mansion. Of course, we could only speculate, and if Shinya didn't feel like talking, we couldn't arrive at the true answer.

On that note, it seemed to me that Akane's big tiff with Kanami was also done to intentionally show their sour relationship. Akane had wanted to put herself in that risky position.

For later on.

I didn't know whether the fact that Akane was the only one without an alibi (well, actually Rei, too) was pure luck, or whether she had figured out a whole strategy. But this point, at least, had to be just a coincidence.

That's what I believe.

"At that point she switched with Ibuki's body?" Iria said. "Then she showed herself to Hikari in the middle of the night, put the clothes she had been wearing on Ibuki, escaped, and…hid away somewhere in the mansion. During dinner just now, she was hiding right by the dining hall listening in on Sashirono's hysteric outburst. Overhearing her saying she was going to stay put in her room, Sonoyama headed out there first and lay in wait. There's no lock, after all. But the hunter became the hunted… Hmm, so that means Sashirono's breaking down and accusing Hikari was all a ruse you set up?"

“Yes,” I nodded. “We could’ve just found her at that point if we had searched the whole mansion, but it’s so huge. It just seemed like it would be a big hassle, so we set a trap instead. I almost bit it, though…”

“The amazing thing about you is that you kept it to ‘almost.’ ”

I didn’t know who was speaking for a second, but it turned out to be Maki. It was the first time she had given me a compliment without a hint of sarcasm. I was just a little bit pleased.

“But hang on a second.” Iria placed a hand on her own head and remained like that for a moment. “Something still seems off,” she said. “Hmm, what is it? Something seems strange to me.”

“Are you wondering how Akane got out of the storage room?”

“Yes, that!” Iria exclaimed with a clap of her hands. “That’s it. That hasn’t been explained yet. Did Shinya pull her up? After switching places with the corpse?”

“Nope. Shinya was only outside the mansion when we buried Kanami’s body in the mountains. At that time, he did drop the body into the storage room, but he didn’t pull Akane out. Hikari saw her at two a.m. Plus, Shinya had an alibi that night as well. So he couldn’t have pulled Akane out. That much is certain.”

“Then did he drop a rope ladder down there or something?”

“That’s not it, either. A rope ladder would’ve left a trace somewhere. I suppose it would’ve been possible if the rope was long enough, but Hikari saw that the window was closed at two a.m. Akane couldn’t have tied the rope outside from the inside of her room. She would’ve needed an accomplice, but as I said, Shinya was busy at the time creating an alibi for himself with Maki.”

“Then it’s impossible after all,” Iria pouted. “My head is spinning in circles. I’m feeling cyanotic here.”

“You probably mean psychotic.”

“That’s the only kind of thing you voluntarily point out, huh?” Iria

grimaced. “Well? You must know the answer?”

“Yes,” I nodded. “She was locked in a room with a door that can only be unlocked from the outside, and a window that opens freely, and she wanted to get out. Iria, what would you have done in that situation?”

“I can’t possibly imagine.”

Spoken like a true princess. “Well, what about you, Akari?”

I had already explained it to Hikari and Yayoi, so I turned to Akari. I could’ve asked Teruko, Rei, or even Maki, but Akari was my type, after all, and I was hoping to break the awkwardness lingering from our morning encounter.

“I…I guess I would stretch my arms up and jump.”

“No doubt. But even when you jump, you still can’t reach it.”

“We’re talking about the storage room, right? If I were locked in there, and jumping didn’t work… Next, I would try standing on the chair, stretching my arms up, and jumping.”

“Even then you don’t reach.”

“Then it’s simple,” she said with a forced jocular expression. “I’d give up.”

“The story can’t go on if you do.”

“Then I suppose it’s over?”

Mmm, how brusque. Maybe it wasn’t awkwardness, maybe she just plain disliked me. Well, whatever. Time to change the channel.

“Akari says she would have used a chair. That’s basically what anybody would do. Like a monkey trying to reach a high-hanging banana.”

“Are you calling me a monkey?!” Akari yelled, her face bright red. “Well, aren’t you rude! Can’t you be a little more delicate? What are

you trying to accomplish by infuriating me?”

My mistake. It seemed I had changed the channel in the wrong direction. “No, that’s not what I meant. And you don’t have to get so angry. Monkeys are adorable.”

“I’ve never been so insulted in my entire life.” She cast her face away from me. “From now on you and I don’t know each other.”

“……”

Her disdain for me was established now. I was a little bit shocked. Dammit, Kunagisa, impressing her with my smarts? It had the exact opposite outcome.

“Um, what can I say… Anyway, you stand on a chair. Anyone would. You jump, you stretch your arms out. You still don’t reach. So what now? It’s simple. You just get on a taller chair.”

“There’s only one chair in that room.”

“Well, ‘chair’ is just a metaphor. It could be anything. So what was in that room?”

“Nothing. Books? The futon? The lamp stand?”

“There was something else, wasn’t there? Something we all saw. It was practically all we saw.”

A silence fell over the group. Maybe they couldn’t think of it, maybe they had thought of it. Either would’ve warranted such a reaction.

It was Iria who finally answered. “It was Ibuki’s corpse, wasn’t it?”

Indeed, I nodded. What else needed to be said?

“Rigor mortis reaches its peak at around the twenty-four-hour mark□well, depending on your sources. After two a.m., give or take, almost exactly that much time had passed since Kanami was killed. Her body was probably stiff as a pole. I’m sure getting those clothes on her was no cakewalk, but there were merits as well. I

guess it had an upside and a downside."

"No cakewalk? It was a suit, for crying out loud. How do you get that on a stiff corpse? Maybe her joints were still mobile, but still…"

"Then she could've brought two pairs of the same outfit. That way she could get it on the body while it was still relatively loose in the afternoon. Maybe Kanami's removed dress was hiding behind the door too," I continued without pausing. "I arrived at this train of thought based on the motive for cutting off the head. That was, of course, so that Kanami's body could play the role of two people. Her face was a hindrance. But I believe there is one more reason. I doubt anyone else has ever cut off a person's head for this reason. Yup. To flatten her shoulders."

"You mean because if she hadn't done that, if the shoulders weren't flat, it wouldn't serve as a stepping stool? Because it wouldn't be stable?" Akari asked feebly, as if stricken with fear, or else hoping for some other answer. "Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes," I confirmed curtly. "Not just a stepping stool, but a staircase. First she placed the chair, then stood Kanami's body up next to it, letting it lean against the wall a little. Then she used the chair as her first step, the body as her second, and made a final leap. Hop, step, and jump. By stretching out her arms, she finally reached the window."

Kanami was always confined to a wheelchair, so I wasn't sure of her exact height, but considering Akane had thought to recycle the body that way, she was probably about as tall as Akane. And that was none too petite. Even without the head, at least five feet tall. If you added Akane's own height, that was ten feet. Plus she was extending her arms. Plus she jumped. As long as her hands made it to the window, all she had to do was pull herself up. The impact from the jump probably caused Kanami's body to topple over, but that was all the better. It would be hard for anyone to tell the body had been used as a stepping stool.

And that's exactly why the head had been lopped off from the very base of the neck.

“It couldn’t have been that easy. I mean, that’s…”

“She didn’t have to succeed right away. In fact, she could have tried any number of times. It’s not the type of thing you can do in one or two tries, but eventually she succeeded and knocked Kanami’s body down in the process. Ideally, you’d also close the window, but you can only do that from the inside, so she probably just gave up on it. When we went and examined Akane’s—by which I mean Kanami’s—body the next day, the peak of the rigor mortis had already passed, and the body had become somewhat loose again. Of course I’m no specialist, so I can’t really say for certain.”

“That’s…” Akari was turning pale. It was the same broken-down Akari I had encountered in the morning. Infuriated, or deep in despair. “That’s terrible. It’s too terrible. It’s unforgivable. To kill a person and cut her head off on top of that, then to dig up her buried corpse and disguise it as someone else on top of that… That’s already unspeakably foul. But using the body as a chair, as a staircase, as a stepping stool? That can’t ever be forgiven—”

“‘It’s difficult to sit on a living person. To sit on a living person for nearly thirty minutes is nearly impossible. But I wouldn’t say sitting on a dead person is very hard at all,’” Shinya recited. “The words of Kenzaburo Oe. Don’t you know it, Akari?”

Still blue in the face, Akari shook her head with a look of disgust. She looked like a small frightened animal. Like she wanted to deny reality.

I couldn’t help but sigh.

A corpse is something that’s been thoroughly spent, with no sentience or personality or soul remaining inside it, just as it no longer has a will or dignity. It is nothing more than a “thing.” And the owner utters no complaint as to what might become of it—and even supposing he or she wanted to, wasn’t in a place to do so.

There was a headless body. She recycled it as her own body.

There was a headless body. She used it as a staircase.

So what if she did?

When you die, that's the end. Not that anything begins because you're alive. As simple as that, nothing more to it. Everybody has a different idea about it, and that's their right, which also means that you can't complain about what others believe.

I let out another sigh.

"So there it is, Iria. The minor details are a pain to explain, so please think about them for yourself. I'm sure everything else can be explained away. Unfortunately, I'm not a nice enough guy to explain it all. Please reason things out on your own."

"The details, huh?" Iria said. "What about the motive? I don't think you can write that off as trivial or minor."

"You'll have to ask them directly."

I repeated the same line I had already uttered a number of times by this point, and looked over at Shinya. So did everyone else. With a resigned look, he prepared to give an answer, when a voice came from behind my back.

"You don't have to answer, Shinya."

I looked back.

Standing in the entrance to the dining room was Akane.

She was supposed to be resting in the bedroom.

How long had she been here?

How much of my nonsense had she heard?

Her arm was in a brace, but she still wore a fearless expression as she looked down, almost contemptuously, upon the human beings seated at the round table.

"Akane…"

ER3 System, Seven Fools, Akane Sonoyama.

Akane, who had claimed that she would never complain no matter when, where, how, why, or by whom she was killed. But did that just mean that she'd granted herself the right to kill no matter when, where, how, why, or whom?

"Hah," she laughed. "Motive? Motive, you say? How lame. What a meaningless and pedestrian thing that is in a world this big. It baffles me why you would even care about such trifles. I don't get it at all. Look, a modest 'slippage' is all it is□"

"……"

Akane gave a sardonic smile as she continued, "I just thought I might eat the brains of all of you."

IRIA AKAGAMI
Mistress of Wet Crow's Feather Island

ONE WEEK LATER
Divergence

REI HANDA
Head Maid at the Mansion

0

Where is that?

Who are you?

1

As luck would have it, just as Kunagisa and I had originally planned, we were able to return to the mainland on the afternoon exactly one week after our arrival. Kunagisa having a tendency (albeit not as obsessive as her vertical motion thing) to hate changing plans once she's made them, this set me at ease a bit.

But come to think of it, Kunagisa's purpose in coming to the island was, at least in part, to satisfy her interest in the "various things" that had occurred there in the past. I asked her about it.

"My investigation is basically over," she said.

It seemed she had been up to some "various things" herself. Not that I wasn't wondering what she had been up to, but if that was the case, there was no problem for now. I just wanted to get home anyway.

I sat on a sofa in a room on the same cruiser that had brought us to the island. Kunagisa lay sleeping on the sofa across from me.

Now that we were set to return to the mainland, I had half-expected

something to happen with Hikari or Akari, but they gave nothing more than the usual, dutiful formalities. Thank you very much. Please visit again if you have the chance. Take care now. I don't even have to get into Teruko's farewell. She didn't utter a single word, as if to say, "I've already spoken to you enough to last a lifetime."

But whatever.

That's how my life goes.

"……"

Akane Sonoyama and Shinya Sakaki.

The two perpetrators of the case were of course no longer allowed to stay on the island and were currently lying low in the next room. I didn't know what they might be talking about.

We were heading back to the mainland as planned, and they were heading back because they had been kicked out. It was the opposite of being marooned, but if you thought about it, "mainland" was wholly subjective.

Yayoi and Maki remained on the island.

Yayoi's doubts regarding Iria and Rei seemed to have been swept away, but whether or not that was a good thing wasn't for me to know. Of course, it was up to Yayoi to decide how she lived her own life, and not my place to butt in.

As for Maki…

She was a sly fox to the very end.

"So how much did you really know?" I asked her before leaving the island.

She responded with an ambiguous smile. "Who's to say? Maybe I don't really know anything. Like the whole thing was really just an act."

“If I may, I’m under the impression you knew about Akane and Shinya’s plans all along and were aiding them in creating alibis.”

“What if I was?” she said nonchalantly. “What if I was?”

“Then you’re an accomplice. That’s all.”

“But it’s not like I had heard anything from Shinya, and he didn’t try to tell me anything.”

“If he had, you would’ve been abetting a murder… You invited him over two nights in a row, helping him create an alibi that was hard for me to trace. So what’s the real story? If you were really cooperating with Shinya, then…”

“Then what?”

“Nothing. I guess nothing would happen,” I shrugged. “Nothing at all.”

Maki responded with a sprightly chuckle.

In reality I wanted to tell her something, but there was no point. If she really possessed those powers there was no need to say anything, and even if she didn’t there was no need. Either way, that was that.

It’s just that I had doubts. Shinya and Akane’s serial murder plot just seemed too perfect, like it relied on one too many coincidences. In presenting my findings to Iria, I had made great efforts to step around that. It’s not that their plans had been sloppy. It was like they had been unrehearsed, yet at the same time, everything had been prepared ahead of time. Or rather, it felt like luck was very much on their side… Yeah, it was like they had factored in coincidences and made friends with luck. As if the lay of the entire island and everything on it were on their side.

“…Nonsense.”

Of course they probably were all just coincidences, and probably just examples of the Law of Great Numbers, and those two had simply won a bet, so to speak. Anything will look fishy if you think

about it selectively.

“Occam’s razor…”

However.

On that island was someone who knew everything, and I do mean everything, even the future.

Was even that a coincidence?

“……”

Good grief.

Indeed, it probably was. I could draw no other conclusion. Even if it wasn’t a coincidence, it was all over already, and there would be no way to prove it, plus Shinya and Akane sure weren’t talking, so there was no point in pursuing it. Even if there was a point, it had nothing to do with me, and even if it had something to do with me, I wasn’t interested.

So there we were.

Instead, I asked a question. “Are you the one who told Teruko I was in trouble?”

There was no reason anyone should’ve known I was about to be done in by Akane in Yayoi’s room, and thus there was no reason Teruko should have conveniently busted in with all the grace and good timing of an action heroine like that.

Unless there was someone who could predict the future, that is.

“Do you think I would do something like that?”

“No.”

“Then I probably didn’t, huh?”

Maki gave me a wicked smile. I decided any further inquiry would be meaningless, so I didn’t even thank her. There was no reason to.

“I wonder what’s going to happen now. To the island, to Iria…”

“Eh,” Maki gave an expectedly curt response.

I shrugged once again. “Well, how about telling me what’s going to happen to me and Kunagisa? As a continuation of that ‘compatibility reading’ from the other night. Are the two of us going to stay like this forever?”

“My readings are expensive.”

“In that case I’ll have to decline.”

“The two of you will stay that way for a little while longer,” Maki told me the very second I gave up. What a perverse contrarian.

“A little while?”

“Yes, a little while.”

“How long?”

“Two years plus change.”

I tilted my head at her. “You mean it’ll turn into something else after two years? Or it’ll completely fade away?”

“Well, I don’t know.” She laughed a bit cynically. “I can’t see more than two years into the future.”

Hadn’t heard that before. I probably failed to conceal my surprise.

“It’s a secret,” she continued. “So I don’t know what will become of you and Kunagisa two years from now.”

“You mean that’s the limit of your power?”

“I mean I’m going to die,” she said plainly. “Time is relative to me. As far as I’m concerned, all time stops at that point. Two years from now, on March 21st, at 3:23 p.m. That’s the date and time that I will die.”

All I could do was be silent.

“Spewing guts and brains all over the place, it’ll be a fitting death for a rascal like me.”

“Can’t you avoid it?”

“When the time comes, be sure to accuse my killer. Just like you did this time. I’m asking you now as a favor.”

“What’s the point in my accepting? You can’t see whether or not I’ve fulfilled it.”

“That’s true,” she said and stuck out her right hand. To me, she looked proud that she, too, had an unforeseeable future. “Let’s shake hands.”

“Sure. Might not be bad to pretend we’re friends now that we’re at the very end.”

Even having said that, I never did grab her hand.

In the end…

I never found out why she’d picked on me so much. It probably didn’t matter, and it was probably better that way.

Yet…

Still…

I had various doubts.

“Excuse me.” The cabin door opened and in walked Rei. “We’ll be docking soon. Please get ready.”

“Sure,” I replied.

Time to wake up Kunagisa.

She seemed to be sleeping awfully comfortably so I didn’t really want to, but I couldn’t just leave her be. Although that would have been pretty funny.

“Um, thank you so much for everything,” Rei took the time to say.

“You, especially. We’re grateful to Kunagisa as well, but you□”

“Made it entertaining, Miss Iria Akagami?”

“Yes,” Rei nodded without any particular sign of surprise. “You bet. I had tons of fun.”

Iria Akagami grinned a genuinely happy grin. A smile she hadn’t given once during her performance as Rei. This wasn’t acting, it was a real, human smile.

“How did you know Rei and I switched? Since when?”

“I just thought of it now. It was just a wild guess. I figured if I was wrong you’d just get a little ticked off, it wasn’t like a breach of your human rights or anything,” I said to Iria. “If you had left this room quicker I probably wouldn’t have even noticed, or at least I wouldn’t have said anything.”

“Is that right,” she nodded solemnly. “I always get sloppy at the end, huh? My grandfather used to say so all the time. But you must have had some reason to think that. Please, enlighten me.”

“What’s it to you?”

“I can use it for future reference.”

So she was going to keep at it?

“I sure am. Yayoi still hasn’t noticed, plus Maki… Well, I don’t know about her,” Iria said with a merry giggle.

With her innocent bearing, the real Iria seemed to lack a certain refinement in comparison to the one on the island□Rei, that is. As though the fake version, being able to play at realness, could be more real.

But Iria just seemed very free.

“Well, let’s see,” I said. “You didn’t talk very much, did you, Iria? It was so unnatural. I’m sure you thought that if you spoke you would give yourself away, but on the other hand, not talking at all was

just as much of a blunder. So you made Teruko act silent as well to create a sort of universal ‘lack of presence,’ thereby covering yourself□”

“No, that’s just how she is,” Iria said. “I can tell her apart from the other two even if she’s not wearing her glasses. Because she never talks.”

Apparently, that was how she was.

Well, if you thought about it, it didn’t really seem like Teruko had been acting.

“Is that right? Well, either way, I figured if that Iria is an imposter, there’s only one person who could take your place. After all, Akari, Hikari, and Teruko are triplets. I guess it’s a little counterintuitive that they couldn’t have swapped places because they’re triplets.”

“You said it,” she smiled.

It was the smile of someone addressing an equal.

At least that’s what I thought.

“And then there was something about your aura. Like, Teruko never seemed to be doing much work. That’s because she was your SP. But I never saw Rei do much work, either. I was wondering about that.”

“I poured your tea, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, it was great.” I had forgotten to thank her earlier, and did so now. “Oh yeah, and also, the first time I visited your room, you were sitting on the sofa and Iria was standing. It seemed like it should’ve been the other way around.”

“My, my.” She was gleeful. I supposed Rei had been copying such mannerisms all along, but there was nothing like the real thing. “Go on.”

“Right. Where was I…”

If you thought about it, Akari and Hikari obviously knew about the switch, which meant that they, too, were quite the pair of actresses. Especially Hikari, who'd been so spry and pitiable, but lying all along…

Somebody owed her an Oscar.

"The nail in the coffin was when the fake Iria covered for you. That night 'Iria' and Yayoi were together talking all night. Isn't that so? Rei was probably asking her for culinary advice. She's really a maid, after all, so it wouldn't be that strange if she had an interest in cooking."

"Yes. Yayoi, believing that Rei was me, wouldn't give me the time of day. That was a miscalculation," Iria said sulkily. "And actually, where does Rei get off performing me like that? I don't change clothes in front of gentlemen, and my personality isn't that crappy."

Apparently, her personality wasn't that crappy.

Hmm, sounded less than truthful to me…

"So what were you really doing that night, anyway?" I asked.

"That's a secret."

"It's a secret?"

"An unmarried lady never discloses her evening's affairs," she said mysteriously.

I had a feeling if I pressed any further it would just tick her off, so I decided to let it go. I wasn't looking for any more trouble. I didn't like "making waves," after all.

"Anyway," I resumed, "even though 'Iria' did nothing to protect Hikari, even treating her like a criminal, she went as far as lying to save your hide. Why? Because Rei is closer to Iria than Hikari is? Maybe. But something about that answer doesn't float my boat. Living on a distant island like that, I would think you'd all get pretty close and cozy. I don't think human beings are that cold a species."

“That’s true,” Iria agreed. “They’re like family. My precious family, who stayed by my side even after I was disowned.”

Disowned.

And the reason for it…

“Iria nevertheless protected Rei but not Hikari. Why? Could it be because ‘Rei’ was really her superior, someone she had sworn allegiance to?” I clapped my hands together. “Something like that?”

“You’re marvelous. I want to hug you.”

“I wouldn’t mind.”

“I will refrain.” Iria giggled innocently.

“I have a question in turn. Why exactly did you switch places with Rei and pose as a maid? Is it because, even if you’ve been disowned, as the Akagami granddaughter you’re being cautious in presenting yourself to visitors?”

There was no guarantee that there wasn’t some unsavory individual mixed in with all those geniuses. Vetting them in advance wouldn’t always work. Sometimes things happened, as they just had.

Thus, she had prepared an imposter□a body double. Was that it?

But Iria shook her head daintily. “No,” she said. “I just wanted to see who would notice first. Just a little prank. No reason, really.”

A prank.

It was a deflating reply, but I didn’t think she was lying this time. And until now, not a single one of those so-called geniuses had caught on.

In all these years, unnoticed by anyone.

Geniuses are nothing special.

Perhaps that was what Iria thought.

And she would probably continue to think so.

“But you noticed.”

“If you hadn’t pushed it at the end, I wouldn’t have. Even if I’d noticed, I’d have kept quiet. You should have just stayed at the mansion instead of coming on this boat with us.”

“Well, I have to go apologize to Aikawa for all the unnecessary hoopla. There’s still a visit scheduled. We’re going to meet straight after dropping you off. Oh, Aikawa’s going to be ticked. Not a person you want to see get angry. Even though it’s inevitable… Plus, well, I wanted to talk to you like this. You showed me such a good time, after all.”

“It’s an honor.”

“Say,” Iria said with a sweet smile, “won’t you return to the mansion sometime? Kunagisa, Maki, Yayoi, and you. I think we’d make a terrific family. I hear you’ve taken a liking to Akari and Hikari, and I don’t mind letting you have your way with them.”

“…That’s not the kind of thing you say to a family member.”

“True, but I’m serious. I’m always serious. So how about it? Like my proposition?”

She innocuously stuck her tongue out at me.

I was appalled more than anything. To be written off as free-spiritedness or vibrancy or lack of restraint, this was simply too…

“I don’t like murderers.”

“Heheheh,” Iria laughed.

I didn’t know why she was laughing.

“No matter what reasons they might have?”

“No matter what reasons they might have.”

“I see.” She nodded. “I’m not sure what you heard from Hikari and Teruko, but you can’t possibly believe that they told you the truth and nothing but the truth. Those triplets are, basically, liars. I think the fact that they never told you about me and Rei’s switch is proof enough of that.”

“I don’t know…”

“I didn’t call the police simply because it wouldn’t have been any fun that way. The authorities are so boorish,” she said, rolling up her left sleeve. This revealed her lovely, perfectly unscarred skin. “Please excuse me then,” she said with a big smile and exited the room.

“Oh boy, oh boy.”

Sigh…

So that was her punch line.

What was real and what was a lie?

Who was real and who was a lie?

It’s a mixed-up world, and I for one never claimed to know anything, nor do I think all people are honest and all things are as they seem.

What could I say?

Really…

“Sheesh, such a jester…”

I thought to wake up Kunagisa, telling her that we were almost there, but seeing her peaceful face as she mewed like a kitten made me not want to. It wouldn’t be too late to wake her up after we reached the coast. The rule of thumb is, the longer you can stay dreaming, the better.

Nevertheless.

Family…

“Man, I’m gonna regret turning down that proposition,” I said to no one in particular, expecting no response. I knew that there was only one possible reply. For me, there was only one person I could ever call family. “A load of nonsense,” I muttered in my usual tone.

EPILOGUE
A Flaming Fairy Tale

A week had passed since returning to the mainland.

I finally began attending college, but finding myself hopelessly unable to adapt due to my late start, I just couldn't get into the mood. And thus I found myself cutting morning classes and walking down West Main Street. What you call a mental health day, or "playing hooky," if you want to be a jerk about it.

"What the hell was I doing all that time before coming back to Japan?"

My self-directed mutterings were more or less heartfelt, but they were probably meaningless. Whether I was in ER3, in Kyoto, or on Wet Crow's Feather Island, it changed me little, just as a five-year blank had hardly changed Kunagisa.

"More nonsense is what that is…" I muttered as I continued my stroll. I turned south, thinking I'd head back to my Nakadachiuri apartment and do some reading, but on the way I remembered today was the day Kunagisa's favorite magazine went on sale, so I dropped by a local bookstore to buy a copy.

"Tomo Kunagisa…"

Since then, Kunagisa had stayed holed up at home. She was deeply immersed in making all sorts of repairs on the workstation and PCs and whatnot that Akane had smashed. She was all fired up, saying this time she was going to rebuild them with steel so they'd be scarily resilient, but common sense seemed to indicate that this was impossible. Of course, what she got fired up about was her business, so I didn't say anything as to that.

As for Akane Sonoyama and Shinya Sakaki, Kunagisa looked up what had become of them on the Internet, most likely employing the skills of her old pal Chee.

Akane had retired from the Seven Fools and was beginning a

somewhat reclusive existence, while retaining her prominence as a scholar. Shinya supposedly remained by her side. Considering the fact that no one had reported them to the police, this seemed plausible enough.

I entered the bookstore and bought what I wanted with a gift certificate, then stood and flipped through it for a while before leaving the store. An extremely gaudy—that is, expensive-looking—convertible was parked in front. Even if this weren't Kyoto, it would have looked out of place; it was that sort of eccentric or acrobatic or what-have-you affair.

The kind of high-class car you see in magazines and the like. You know, with names like "Anaconda" or "Viper" or "Japanese Ratsnake." Probably not the last, but I was sure it was something in the snake family. But what were they doing riding in a car like this on a Japanese road? To begin with, what type of person traveled in such a ridiculous beast of a machine? I glanced over to see the driver step out. It was a woman adorned in attire that was just as flashy as her vehicle.

She wore a generously revealing dress shirt inside a wine red suit that was bound to catch any passerby's attention, wanted or not. On top of that she had a spring coat draped over her shoulders with nothing in the sleeves. Her shoulder-length hair was unnaturally shimmery, suggesting she had used any number of expensive hair products. Deep red sunglasses completely concealed her eyes. Her proportions were enough to make you wonder if she was some sort of model, and she was tall too. She was a beautiful woman in the truest sense, but at the same time, she was the kind of beautiful woman you hesitated to approach—idiosyncratic and certainly not for everybody; anti-healing, reverse-soothing.

"Wow," I managed to eke out an utterance of wonderment.

So, good-looking cars do have good-looking drivers, I thought casually as I gazed at her striding toward me. I cleared a path for her, thinking she wanted to stop in the bookstore, but I was wrong.

She came to a halt right in front of me. Then she stared at me over her sunglasses. Dominated by her overwhelming and violent

presence, I found myself unable to move. Like a deer in headlights. And as such, I was unable to avoid it.

Without any warning, she brought her long leg upward, sinking her pump-adorned foot into my gut. I crumpled face down to the pavement.

“Ugh…”

I felt like I was going to puke until there was nothing left in my stomach. But there was no time to scream. With no mercy or reservation, she began stomping on my collapsed body. With the heel part of her shoe, so it hurt quite a bit.

As is always the case when you’re in trouble, there wasn’t a single person in the vicinity. There was a bus stop nearby, but the bus must have just left because nobody was there. Damn, must be my lucky day. Still, I had no intention of making an ugly spectacle of myself by screaming for help. I rolled over in an attempt to somehow escape, but this ended in failure as soon as she seized me by the collar.

Just like that, she lifted me up.

“Huh… You really don’t close those eyes,” she said as if impressed. “Wow, pretty amazing. Haha. That’s kinda cool. Okay, anyway… Hello.”

“…Hello.”

“Come on, this isn’t a funeral.”

What the hell is she talking about, I wondered as she tightened her grip around my neck. She dragged me over to her convertible and tossed me into the passenger seat like a suitcase. Then she got herself into the driver’s seat. She took off her shades and jammed her foot down on the accelerator. It seemed the car had been idling the whole time. She was a foe to the environment.

“……”

Rubbing my stomach and back, I contemplated my situation.

Um, what was this? What was going on? Was this an abduction? Why me? Things were moving too fast and I couldn't keep up. As much as I was a go-with-the-flow nineteen year old, I had scarcely been caught up in a torrential rapid like this before. Who was this woman?

"Um, who are you?"

"Hmm? My name? You just ask my name there, pal?"

She looked over at me. Her glare was even worse with the shades off. It was a terrifying gaze that seemed to "pierce straight through my heart." What kind of life did one have to live to obtain a gaze like that?

"The name's Jun Aikawa."

"……"

Aikawa?

Aikawa, Aikawa… The name rang a bell.

"Aikawa?"

"Jun is fine."

Her style of speech was brusque and surly. It seemed like such a waste, considering how beautiful she was, but maybe it suited her personality surprisingly well.

"Uh, Jun. Have we met before somewhere? I've got kind of a bad memory when it comes to people, but I don't feel like we've met before."

"First time."

"Thought so." Even if we'd only met one time, there was no forgetting someone like her.

"What's that now? Oh? You mean Iria never told you?"

“Iria?” That name rang a bell, too. “Uh, Iria, Iria…”

Ah.

At last, the circuit in my brain connected.

Right. I remembered.

“So you’re the ‘master detective’…called ‘Aikawa’?”

“I’m a contractor, to be precise,” she said cynically. “Looks like you remembered.”

“I didn’t think you were a woman.”

“Thanks. That’s the best compliment there is.”

She smacked me on the shoulder. It was more than a little surprising to learn that the Aikawa I had assumed was a man was, in fact, a woman□and such a beautiful one at that. But if you thought about it, except for the tagalongs like Shinya and me, Iria had mostly brought relatively young women to the island. Looking at it that way, I probably should have realized Aikawa was a woman.

But Iria kept using ambiguous words like “hero”…

“I was going to go all the way to your college,” Aikawa said with a faint smile. “But then I spotted you standing there reading in that bookstore. It was a hell of a coincidence, so I thought I’d give you a whistle.”

“You mean you were looking for me?”

“Yep. Thought I ought to see with my own eyes what kind of jerk was sneaking around stealing my jobs. Thanks to you, you chump, I never had my turn. How’re you gonna make up for that?”

She glared at me. It was like she had a direct grip on my heart. In my mind, the events that had occurred on that island were already over, so this development was completely beyond my expectations.

“Because of you I missed out on a job. And it was a safe and easy gig, too.”

“Uh, I…” Not really understanding the situation, I decided to just go ahead and apologize. “I’m very sorry. Please forgive me.”

“Haha!” Aikawa laughed. “No reason to apologize. In fact, I should be thanking you for lightening my load.”

Well, which was it? My unease grew proportionally the more I gathered myself. What the hell situation had I gotten myself into? It was beyond comprehension. I had no idea what this Jun Aikawa character was trying to do.

“Um, where are we headed now?”

“Heaven. Or maybe hell. I forgot.”

“They’re totally different.”

“Yup, totally different. They’re complete opposites. So we’re bound to end up at one of them.”

Where was she pulling this stuff from?

She went on driving without a care in the world. Maybe we really were headed for hell. It seemed quite possible. In a relatively unexpected turn, maybe my life was about to end. Because the end is always abrupt.

“Well, now that I’ve seen your face, that’s one thing to mark off the to-do list. That leaves just one more.”

Without a shred of reserve, Aikawa leaned that alluring face of hers right next to mine. I reflexively flinched at her familiarity. I wasn’t very used to close contact with people other than Kunagisa.

“Um, one more… What is it?”

“Oh, I just thought I’d put one of your woes to rest,” Aikawa said. “I’m a contractor. It’s my job to solve people’s pesky little problems. I lend a helping hand to folks with problems they can’t handle

themselves."

"So that's what you mean by 'contractor'?" In which case the "job" of being a master detective must have been one of her contracts. "But what problem do I have?"

"On rare occasions I work for charity. Call me capricious. It'll be your reward for solving the last case so splendidly in my stead."

"Reward?"

"Don't be so tense. I may not look it, but I'm pretty much full of goodness."

Good people don't usually beat the hell out of others with their pumps on a first meeting.

"Now then, troubled one. You gonna take my hand?" she said, showing me the palm of her hand. "What's it gonna be? Your decision."

"…"

She was weird. Like, crazy weird. Her weirdness was in a league of its own. Even setting that pack of eccentric crazies on our favorite solitary island as the average, Aikawa's weirdness was off the chart. Nevertheless, I grabbed her hand without hesitating, which was pretty rare for me.

This bizarre human being. How could I miss out on this?

"Okay, pal." She gave a wicked smile.

Maybe that was hasty of me, I thought. "Um, before we get into anything, what is this 'woe' of mine you mentioned?"

"That's the one thing you ought to know way better than me. Way better. Can't you guess? I've come to see you. Me. So obviously it's about the events on Wet Crow's Feather Island."

"The case?" I said.

“Yup.” Aikawa gave a small nod. “After that, I ended up paying a visit to the island anyway. I was originally planning to make it a vacation, so I was lucky the case had already been solved. I really mean that. Anyway, I talked to Iria, Hikari, Akari, and Rei. Incidentally, Teruko didn’t say a word. Silent one, huh? Even I’ve only heard her voice one time. Oh yeah, there was also a so-so good chef and some creepy fortune-teller. Ah, I don’t want to think about her. What was up with that lady?!”

Suddenly furious, Aikawa punched the steering wheel so hard I thought it might break. Evidently something had transpired with Maki on the island. What had that woman done now? To be sure, you could tell just by looking that the two ladies weren’t compatible…

“Hmph,” Aikawa grumbled before continuing her story. “Anyway, they told me about the case. No detail left out.”

“And you weren’t satisfied?” I asked her. “I mean, what do you think personally, Aikawa?”

“That’s Jun,” she said in a suddenly low and grim voice. “Don’t call me by my last name. Only my enemies do that.”

“Do you still think there’s something wrong, Jun?” I corrected myself and asked again.

“That’s better,” she smiled. Her moods changed like mad. I’d say they changed like the weather, but not even mountain weather changed this often. “No no… I’m not the one who’s not satisfied, buddy. It’s you, right? You solved the case. And you did it damn well. You did it so damn well nobody could even raise an objection. But you yourself still have doubts, don’t you? Aren’t you dissatisfied with your own detective work?”

I was at a loss for words. Indifferent to this, she continued.

“Am I right? You solved the case in three days. It’s only natural someone with brains like yours would still have doubts. Stop me if I’m wrong.”

I couldn't say anything, and obviously it wasn't because she was out of line. It was because she was exactly right.

Exactly.

I… Kunagisa and I had made solving the case quickly a priority and shoved our own doubts into a dark corner. We had submitted a solution we personally didn't approve of.

Aikawa grinned. "That dissatisfaction, those doubts, those things that seem less than agreeable to you, you chump□have you got them pinpointed?"

"Uh, well…"

"Why would Shinya kill Ibuki? Why would Shinya and Sonoyama become accomplices?" She flicked out her flaming red tongue provokingly. "That's it, isn't it?"

"Yes," I nodded reluctantly. "But that's their problem and, ultimately, no one else's, right? It has to do with their motives, and that's something beyond my grasp, so…"

"You're similar," Aikawa said. "Didn't you think so? Didn't Shinya tell you that himself? That you and he are 'similar.' Now why would this guy so much like you kill Kanami Ibuki, the one person irreplaceable to him, his version of that 'blue-haired girl' of yours?"

"It's probably just a misunderstanding. If it wasn't… I guess it's probably actually Akane who's 'irreplaceable' to Shinya."

"And you're satisfied with that?" pressed Aikawa, her tone sarcastic. "No way, right? There ain't no way you're satisfied with that. I fully understand your sentiments."

"You're beating around the bush, aren't you? You're right, Aikawa, I'm not totally convinced, but□"

"That's Jun. I told you not to call me by my last name."

I got glared at again. It was frightening. "…Jun. You're right, I'm not totally convinced, but there are no other possibilities, so there's

nothing I can do. When you've erased all the impossible possibilities, the remaining one is the truth, no matter how impossible it seems."

"That's a myth. So you mean you've been taking that ridiculous motive about eating people's brains seriously?"

Huh. I was at a loss for words. Aikawa grinned, reveling in my response.

"Now now now, get yourself together. Get yourself together, man. Do you really think there's a single idiot in this whole world dumb enough to believe if you eat the brain of a genius, you become a genius? It's not a bad thing if there is someone like that. People are free to think what they want. Everyone has the right to be feeble-minded. There's nothing wrong with that. We have freedom of thought, and freedom to be stupid. But would someone willing to use a corpse as a stepping stool, someone who has absolutely no respect for humans, really think something like that? What do you think, bud?"

Well, indeed, that was a good point. "So… But so what? I've always been confident in my ability to talk around subjects, but you're putting me to shame."

"That's because you're below me. I know something you don't know. Not to say you're incompetent or nothin'."

"You're calling yourself competent?"

"I'm a hyper-competent jack-of-all-trades. If I wasn't, I couldn't do this kind of work," she boasted. She was almost frighteningly narcissistic.

"Well then, what do you think, Jun? You're saying you figured it all out, right? Please enlighten me."

"If you had just asked me that in the first place we could've cut right to the chase," chided Aikawa, laughing. "Come on, bud. With your brains, you'd have noticed something unnatural. I heard from Hikari. You noticed it, right? That painting you modeled for. Why

was there a watch painted in?”

……

I was stunned.

The watch?

I had completely forgotten about that.

“You didn’t forget about that, did you?” Aikawa said menacingly. “Please don’t tell me you forgot something that important.”

“Of course not. How could I forget? But I thought it was just…a drawing mistake. Kanami relied on her memory to paint, so I thought it was just a memory issue.”

“Not likely. It’s essentially impossible for someone who claims her memory and perception are synonymous to make a blunder like that. Even supposing it was possible, don’t you think there’s some other reason, bud?”

“Okay, Ai□Jun. What do you think?”

“I don’t know what other people think, but this is what I, Jun Aikawa, humanity’s strongest contractor, have concluded: that portrait wasn’t painted by Kanami Ibuki.”

“……”

“Right? That’s the only viable possibility. I mean, think about it the other way around. Let’s say Ibuki painted it. If she painted it, it would be weird for there to be a watch, right? You weren’t wearing a watch when you were sitting in front of her. So it probably wasn’t painted by her.”

“…Why?”

“What do you mean ‘why’? You didn’t actually see her painting it, did you? Sure, maybe there are artists who only work when they’re alone, but I don’t think Ibuki was one of them. I submit that Ibuki could not paint.”

“She couldn’t? Kanami was a painter. She was famous. How could she not be able to paint?”

“Plenty of artists have used fraudulent ghost painters,” Aikawa said as if she were stating the obvious. “Thousands. Thousands of them. It wouldn’t be odd if Ibuki was one of them. Not one bit odd.”

“So you think Kanami was a fraud?”

“Just think about it,” urged Aikawa. “Do you paint at all?”

“Art is not my forte.”

“And you inanely thought, ‘This person is an artist to the bone’ or something along that line about Kanami Ibuki, didn’t you?”

“……”

Why did this woman know what people were thinking so damn accurately? She reminded me of Maki, but telling her this would anger her, so I remained silent.

“Don’t compare me to that sketchy character.”

Hey now.

Aikawa wore a nihilistic smirk. “Don’t clam up,” she prodded, looking over at me. “That was a basic mind-reading trick. It’s just a technique. With a little training, anyone can do it. But that aside, why did you think Ibuki was an artist?”

“Why? Well, uh.” Cat had my tongue.

“It’s not like you ever saw her paint anything, right? She only told you that, bud. You heard what she had to say, and then, based solely on that, you assumed she was an artist.”

“I saw her work, too. Like a rendition of cherry blossoms.”

“But you didn’t see her working on it, did you? Man, for someone who doesn’t trust anyone, you sure are naïve. It’s like you don’t trust anyone but you don’t doubt them, either, or like you just

withhold all conclusions indefinitely. You just took Ibuki's steaming pile of doo-doo for fact."

Doo-doo?

Did she say doo-doo? Was everything Kanami said nothing more than doo-doo? How can anyone say□

"Oh, how can anyone say for sure?" Aikawa beat me to the punch with my own line. "Really? Really, buddy?"

"If there's something you want to tell me, go for it."

"That's no way to ask for a favor."

"Please tell me."

Aikawa smiled. Maybe she was more childish than she looked. "Like the whole dress thing. When you modeled for her, you saw her wearing her dress, and what did you say? You said, 'You're going to paint like that?' Right?"

I didn't know who she had heard that from (and only Maki was likely to know), but that was exactly right.

"A real artist never dirties her clothes with painting materials," Aikawa muttered. And then suddenly, "As if anybody like that really exists!" she yelled. "That's impossible! Even if she didn't get her clothes dirty, they'd stink! It's not a matter of can and can't□people don't do that! Don't you notice these things, you moron?"

This was no act, she really seemed mad. I cowered in all seriousness. I thought I was about to get pounded. Now I understood what Hikari had meant.

A "violent temper," huh?

"Anyway, when you're working with paint on canvas, you at least put on an apron. Even if you suck at art, that much is just common sense."

“Sure. But if that’s the case, then…”

What did that mean? Kanami lied to me? No, not only that she didn’t know anything about art?

There was no way an artistic genius like Kanami Ibuki didn’t know something as simple as that. Why? Because it was a fact that anybody with a little experience would realize…

Which meant…

“Yup, didn’t know anything,” Aikawa said in a slightly mocking tone. “Kanami Ibuki, the genius painter who couldn’t paint. So, how will you solve this conundrum?”

“Well, uh, are you saying Kanami was a fraud?”

“No. Think. And then realize, man. Thus Ibuki didn’t paint that picture. But Ibuki was a painter. Therefore, by the law of syllogism, that Ibuki was a fake. So of course she couldn’t paint.”

“A fake? But a fake… Why? Um, sorry, I’m totally confused.” I clutched my head and thought. “So…in other words…an imposter Kanami was killed, and the real one wasn’t?”

“Yup. And the real Akane Sonoyama was murdered.”

Aikawa smacked my shoulder again.

My thought process ceased for a moment.

In no time, though, it was assailed by astonishment.

“Say what now? Akane?”

“Yeah, Akane Sonoyama. If you think about it, that clears up the initial doubt, doesn’t it? Why did Shinya kill Ibuki? Simple. He didn’t. Why did Shinya become Sonoyama’s accomplice? Simple. He didn’t. He was working with Ibuki. His irreplaceable Ibuki.”

“Kanami and Akane had switched places? When? Hold on a second here. I spent three days on the same island with those two. I may

have a bad memory, but I definitely would've known if they did a switch."

"So they switched before that, before they arrived on the island. I don't know how long those two were there, but it was before that."

"One has blond hair and blue eyes. The other is a dark-haired intellectual type. How in hell do two people that different□"

"Hair can be dyed. You can put on color contacts. If you really want to look like someone else, it's simple. Especially when the person has such notable characteristics. Think about it."

"But then, that painting□"

"Sonoyama must have done it, huh? That day, I bet you were wearing a watch every time Sonoyama saw you. Thus, she's the one who painted you. Sonoyama…as Ibuki."

Akane Sonoyama…as Kanami Ibuki. Come to think of it, where was Akane that morning? Was she in the atelier doing that cherry blossom picture? Was Akane the one painting me that night?

"Why would she□"

"To make everyone think she was Ibuki. Surely you'd never guess that someone who could paint such a portrait wasn't Kanami Ibuki. Though I will say, the whole watch mistake wasn't up to par for them."

"But…but Iria was the one who invited them. Wouldn't she have noticed right away?"

"How do you figure?"

"I mean, she must've at least seen pictures of them before."

"Pictures? Hey now. Hey now, man. Don't make me laugh, buddy. You trying to make me laugh to death? Gimme a break. Do you think people's faces look the same in real life as they do in photos? They leave pretty different impressions, don't they? That's why wanted posters never work. Photos are still, reality moves. And the

human eye chooses things arbitrarily. That's how it is. So naturally, when you compare the two, your mind favors reality."

She was right. Kanami herself had said something of the sort. Suddenly I had the bizarre, truly bizarre feeling that I was the real culprit and Detective Aikawa was hot on my tail.

"Why… Why were they doing that?"

"It was a prank. They switched places as a prank. Iria and Rei switched places, too, didn't they? And they said it was a prank when you asked why, I'm sure. It's the same deal. I wonder who will notice. Will any of the so-called geniuses notice? Can the salon-running princess who dares to summon geniuses even tell the difference between us?"

"……"

"That's at least what Sonoyama was thinking, I bet. Oh, the real one, I mean. Shinya and Ibuki contacted Sonoyama and brought the plan to her. Sonoyama got on board. She probably thought it would be funny. Scholars can be surprisingly hedonistic. Especially those ER3 System goons. I'm sure you know that though. You were right smack in the middle of it."

That information from Chee.

Kanami Ibuki and Akane Sonoyama had met in Chicago… They were acquaintances… It wasn't so impossible that they had planned such a thing. Kanami and Akane, who had gotten into countless arguments. Was all that fighting just something they'd pre-planned so their switch wouldn't be obvious?

"But what does that mean?"

"This: Ibuki and Sonoyama switched places. Ibuki became Sonoyama, Sonoyama became Ibuki. Then one of them was killed. The remaining one was Sonoyama. The switched Sonoyama."

"……"

"Who would think a woman thought dead and then pronounced the

murderer is actually someone else?”

“You mean Kanami took Akane’s place?”

Akane had retired from the Seven Fools and was beginning a somewhat reclusive existence, while retaining her prominence as a scholar. Shinya supposedly remained by her side.

“Since no one reported them to the police, that seems plausible enough,” Aikawa said cynically.

“Are you saying that’s the motive? But why would they□”

“Ha!” Aikawa’s body shook as she laughed and narrowed her eyes at me. “That’s an unspeakably irrelevant question, my man. Man, if I asked you why you’re alive, how would you answer me?”

“……”

“Granted, a guy like you must’ve never wanted it. I bet you’ve never wanted to become something. I bet you’ve never wanted to become someone. If not, then you’ll never understand Kanami Ibuki’s feelings, no matter how much it’s explained to you. If you’ve come up with your own style on your own, you’ll never understand Kanami Ibuki’s feelings even if you visited the whole universe.”

A virtual machine, I realized.

A fake. There to trick the software.

“Does that mean you understand, Jun?”

“Nope. Other people’s feelings are beyond my understanding. But insofar as I have a working brain, I can at least imagine. Yeah. The ‘locked room’ stuff was a kid’s toy, just a game for them. A diversion to keep people from learning their true objective. Even you got so distracted by all the locked rooms and decapitations that you didn’t even consider the possibility that they’d switched places from the outset, right?”

She was right.

But…but it was all too sudden.

“Um, I can’t just believe all this up front.”

“That’s right. For sure. It’s so convoluted it’s unbelievable. It’s so convoluted that my delivery and your personality are no match. But it has a point. That woman discarded her former shell known as ‘Ibuki’ and succeeded in being reborn as ‘Sonoyama.’ She completely hijacked Akane Sonoyama’s background.”

“But won’t she be found out?”

“Hell no. She’d probably been preparing for this for a long, long time. And don’t you think the whole crazy idea to replace Sonoyama, to turn into her, came from the fact that they sort of looked alike to begin with?”

“To turn into her… So you’re saying that’s why she killed her? I mean I guess if you wanted to become someone you’d want to get rid of the real person, but still…” To be sure, killing someone was the fastest way to get rid of them. And indeed, a solitary island beyond the influence of the police was a prime location to do it. “If that’s the case, then it should’ve just ended once Ibuki was killed. There was no need to make herself a victim and play dead.”

“Get a hold of yourself, man. Jeez, you’re useless. If she did it like that, surely the question of why only Ibuki got killed would come up in no time. That’s why she had to make it look like a serial killing. To hide her true intentions by killing. She had to pose as a lust murderer going after everyone. That business about eating everyone’s brains was probably added on as an afterthought, no doubt after she overheard you guys talking. But even if she had to kill someone, she probably couldn’t bear to kill an innocent, so she pretended to be the victim herself instead. It’s so clear-cut. Her calculations were so disarmingly clear.”

“Would a murderer really be so coy?”

“Not all murderers are bloodthirsty maniacs. Just like not all wolves are lone wolves. In reaching your objective, it’s only natural to try and avoid danger as much as possible. The more cases arise, the

more clues you give everyone. Am I wrong?”

Shinya had told me they were planning to kill everyone, and I’d believed him. After they had already killed two people, plus the attempt on Yayoi and myself, I never would have dreamed they knew anything of moderation.

Yet…

“But she tried to kill Yayoi.”

“She didn’t kill her,” Aikawa cut down my objection in one fell swoop. “You made an assumption. You assumed ‘Akane Sonoyama’ would kill again after she went as far as recycling a corpse to hide herself. That’s why you thought up that trap, using Sashirono as bait. If you thought that it was over, you wouldn’t have come up with that trap. But no. You were prejudiced.”

“……”

“Think about it. Then realize, man, you were dancing in the palm of Ibuki and Shinya’s hand. Why would Shinya show you the sleeping bag? Why would Ibuki smash those computers in the morning when everyone clearly had an alibi?”

“Even that?”

Everything, even that, had been calculated? They had predicted□no, dictated□our actions that far? The showdown in Yayoi’s room, Kunagisa’s anguish, all of it was in the palm of their hand? Had we all been nothing more than chess pieces subject to a strategy so devious there was no room to anticipate the next move? Thinking all the while we were so clever, we were really just being manipulated.

I had no basis to argue that it was outlandish. Still, wasn’t this all just a little too outrageous?

But.

That vague sense of discomfort I felt had now disappeared without a trace.

Aikawa reached at me with her right hand and, using those long, slender, white fingertips, began brushing my lips. Though I can't speak from experience, I thought it felt very much like being raped.

"You were made to fit right into the picture, so to speak. Perfectly, without so much of a discrepancy as a wristwatch, into Kanami Ibuki's painting. Now that's an artist, if you'll excuse me. Haha. Maybe they were originally planning to use me, 'the person to arrive in a week,' in their scheme. It didn't matter who. All they needed was someone to solve the mystery of the locked rooms. As long as somebody figured out and exposed the truth that 'Akane Sonoyama' wasn't dead and then fingered her as the killer so that 'she' could come back to life, that was all that mattered."

And she would obtain a magnificent new identity. Enjoying worldwide recognition as a grand unifying unitary scholar□

"But…" I pointed out, "even if she switched backgrounds and managed to turn into someone else, you still have to account for ability. 'Akane' is still continuing her life as a well-rounded and outstanding scholar, even though she's retired from the Seven Fools. If those two really did switch places□"

"If, huh?" Aikawa said, laughing. "You're still talking about it in those terms, man? You sure don't know when to give up, do you?"

"Based on your detective work, Akane is really Kanami. But as far as Kunagisa has researched, she's still an active scholar."

"And why not? She can paint, she's learned, obviously she's capable of murder, and she's even capable of impersonating people. Doesn't that essentially make her a genius?"

"A genius…"

Why had Ibuki been summoned there? Was it not because she possessed extraordinary ability? She was the most heterodox of the heterodox. The ultimate of ultimates. Beyond our realm. Yes, that was absolutely…

"What was your definition of a genius again, buddy? Someone

who's 'far away'? I heard from Iria. But you're wrong. It's a vector, basically… Someone who can unleash all of the time in his or her entire life in a single direction. A human being can do all sorts of stuff. But if, instead, a person just focuses on one skill, the output level is ridiculous. So much so that they seem 'distant,' to use your analogy."

A prominent function. The direction of a vector. A restrictive bias.

If you set that arrow in a single direction, instead of dispersing every which way…

The power of focus. The savant syndrome. Inexhaustible desire.

"……"

Patt patt, Aikawa smacked me on the shoulder.

"You did well, pal. But you're still an amateur. In baseball terms, Mr. Pitcher and Cleanup Hitter, you're a Little Leaguer. And just when you thought your opponent was a Little Leaguer, too, she turned out to be Domu, figuratively speaking. You know, as in a child's dream? Before your time?" Aikawa said, familiarly placing her arm on my shoulders. "It was just a little premature, trying to end the story before the great detective arrived, my man. You're still too green."

"But… Hang on a second here. Kanami was in a wheelchair."

"Any old person with working legs can sit in a wheelchair," Aikawa said cynically. "That's all there is to it, really. According to Kanami Ibuki, legs are just a decoration. Sure, they helped in kicking you around, but that's about it."

"Maybe that's the case for Akane. All she had to do was sit in a wheelchair. But Kanami was born with bad legs. She couldn't just jump around all over the place like□"

"Kanami Ibuki, who wanted to become Akane Sonoyama. Kanami Ibuki, who wanted to usurp another person's identity. I wouldn't be surprised if someone had taken Kanami Ibuki's place before this."

Just how long had Shinya been serving Ibuki? He had said it was a long time.

Since when, exactly?

And now, too, he remained by Akane's side.

Until when, exactly?

A virtual machine.

Simulating the presence of multiple machines…

Possessing no style.

Abandoning all styles.

"Is that even…"

What about Maki?

Had the transcendent entity called Maki Himena "known" even this fact? Had she just been watching over or blowing off the situation with an interminable grin despite knowing everything?

What was real? What was a lie?

Who was real? Who was a lie?

"You can't ask questions. Heheh," Aikawa chuckled.

And at last, she pulled the car over to the side of the road.

"Dust the dust… That's all I can say. And you did good, kid. You did real good. How's that for a compliment? But you gotta try a little harder than that. If you're dissatisfied, don't pretend you aren't. Make what's unstable stable. Drive the irrational into the rational. Don't write your thoughts off as worthless sentiment. M'kay?"

"Okay."

"That's the A answer," Aikawa said, sticking out her flaming red

tongue. “Well, I’m done bugging you. Folks like you make life worth living. I really think so. But pal, you just need to cut down on the slacking a little bit. Humanity is a much more kickass species than that, so get out there and do it, dammit.”

Then, with a little tilt of her head:

“Well, that’s it for today. See ya. C’mon, get outta here, you’re in the way.”

She had a hell of a nerve tossing me into the car and then kicking me out. But naturally I couldn’t muster the energy to contradict her, so I opened the door and stepped out.

Looking around to see where I was, I discovered we were right in front of Kunagisa’s condominium.

If there was ever a street in this world that didn’t belong in Kyoto, it was this swanky residential one, Shirosaki. Even Aikawa’s flaming red car didn’t seem out of place here.

“I see…” I nodded, looking up toward the roof of the building. “This is heaven all right.”

“Or hell. Haha. This is where you were headed anyway, yeah?”

“How’d you know?”

Aikawa pointed at the bag in my hands from the bookstore. True, I was on my way to deliver the contents to Kunagisa. But this lady really sleuthed that out just from this bag? She was like…someone from an all-too-renowned old novel…

Like a master detective.

“Ha,” Aikawa laughed. “Well, if our fates are linked, we’ll meet again. Given an oddball like you and Jun Aikawa, I have no doubts about that.” She gave me a regular, non-cynical smile and patted me once each on the head and shoulder. Then, pointing to the top floor of the condominium, she said, “Say hi to Kunagisa for me, too.”

Now, I had a question. If there was anyone to commend in this case, Kunagisa deserved at least half the credit. So why had Aikawa only come to see me? Was she planning to see Kunagisa later?

“Aren’t you going to see Kunagisa?” I asked, wondering about that. “You came all this way. You might as well.”

“Nah, that’s okay. I saw her yesterday.”

“……”

I was the one on the back burner.

The strength drained from my shoulders.

I sighed.

“Jun.” My final question. “So…so why do you choose to live?”

“Like you have to ask. I’m the same as you, Iitan.”

Having given my nickname a kiddy inflection, she stepped on the accelerator, and in another instant the red contractor had vanished from sight. I stood rigid for a while there, unable to think. I didn’t feel like thinking.

Oh boy…

“It’s like I’ve been mugged…”

It was a fairly accurate comparison. I felt an emptiness, like the luggage had been snatched off my back.

What was with that lady? Why did she start everything off by kicking the crap out of me? Was she just testing what she heard from Teruko? Or was it simply payback?

And bothering to come see me in the first place□was it payback? For stealing her turn? Maybe that was it, or maybe it was just on a whim, or maybe it was, as she claimed, some kind of reward.

But maybe none of that mattered, either. She didn’t seem exactly

benevolent, but even if I was wrong about that, it probably wasn't an incorrigible error in any case.

Really…

For goodness' sake.

What is this?

I'm surrounded by it here.

Really.

"Really now… What a bunch of nonsense."

Take Iria Akagami.

She brought together geniuses, deceived them, tricked them, did anything she wanted just for the sake of her own enjoyment, for the sake of the little world that was all her own. Now and going forward.

Take the Chiga sisters.

All three of them seeming somewhat off, the same but totally different, they were like the Sierpinski Gasket, bearing complete self-similarity, the individual parts and their sum uniform, all of them exactly the same while being different, an infinite abyss inside them impossible for anyone to view.

Take Maki Himena.

She who had the end of her life to look forward to in two years, who knew the whole truth, who, knowing all truths, only grinned, and yawned like a cat, and went on napping.

Take Jun Aikawa.

A big blur of red in the guise of a detective who called herself humanity's strongest contractor, she had shown up on the island and solved the already solved case beyond any shred of doubt, no blade of grass left unchecked, all for no reason, and then vanished

in a cloud of cynicism.

Take that woman whose name I didn't know, that woman who was no one.

She was…surely a genius.

"And…"

And then.

And for instance, Kunagisa.

"……"

Nothing really matters to me.

The world will only turn out as it will, and if it won't, that has nothing to do with me, and if it does, I'm not interested.

I've never wanted to become someone, and I've never felt like there was something I had to do. Sometimes I wonder if that's okay, but in the end, that doesn't really matter to me, either.

I'm cold that way.

No, that's not right.

I'm probably dry that way.

Apathetic and indifferent.

And that's why, for me, Kunagisa is so humidifying.

"Moisture…"

The character for the name "Jun" could mean that.

Was Shinya the same way? Shinya Sakaki, serving that woman like a shadow. If so, he and I really were of the same breed, almost too much so.

"Hah…"

Sigh.

I didn't know who our worlds revolved around, but the Earth revolves around the Sun. That's all there is to it, really, and it's probably never anything more. And that goes for everyone.

The truth is always out of my reach.

And what's more, I don't really want it.

Maybe that was the problem. It must be what Aikawa meant by "slacking."

"Not that any of it matters. I don't live to sit and think about those kinds of things, and it's not like I'm trying to change the world or solve its mysteries. When I'm confronted with a puzzle, it's just annoying. If I can just keep on living like this tomorrow, that's enough."

Done talking to myself, I finally stepped forth.

Any more thinking was just a bother. I'd leave it to the people who wanted to do the thinking. No offense to Aikawa, but I wasn't looking to grant some kind of value to the world.

If anybody asked me why I chose to live, I'd probably say just in case. That's about the only reason people have, and that goes for me, you, and everybody.

But.

But Kunagisa is different.

If I were to put it in words, that was pretty much it.

"Well, whatever."

With Kunagisa's condo in plain sight, I thought about just going back home for the day. I just wanted to throw off that haughty contractor's expectations, that's all.

Even if we didn't meet today, we could always meet tomorrow. We

could meet up anytime we wanted.

Nothing more to it.

Hmm, but…

My legs came to a halt once again.

And I thought□

Five years ago.

Before meeting Tomo Kunagisa, I had nothing. But even reuniting now, even being together all the time, I still had nothing.

I was empty.

It was like…

Meaningless routine work.

Just functioning, just living.

“Ah…dammit.”

The contractor’s sardonic smile crossed my mind.

The seer’s line came back to me.

The lying sisters’ words, too.

And□the advice of that woman whose identity remained a mystery.

“I’m going, okay? I’m going…”

Aggravating as it was, my life amounted to little more than just going with the flow. So then let me be manipulated however people like, however they please, however they wish.

Like a doll.

Like a machine lacking any heart.

As horribly half-assed I was even at that.

And so.

The blithely ambiguous and mechanical obscurities, mediocrely eventless, accompanied by an almost unnaturally vacuous certainty, come to an end much like a vapid and flaming fairy tale.

Now going to Kunagisa’s side□thought me.

Afterword

It's by now common sense that when we look back facetiously on the not so long history of humanity, we end up being surprised by how numerous people meriting the designation of "genius" are, but the fact is that we actually don't tend to point out that these lovable geniuses, whether they were good or evil, were what they were thanks to the mediocrities that surrounded, supported, and fended for them. Put strongly, say if a certain arbitrary individual is a genius, unless someone around him "discovers" the genius of his talent, chances are almost nil that he can notice his genius, and that individual will live a flat and ordinary life. One's own talent is, for oneself, simply a given, and the difference arises for the first time only in contrast to others, but in thinking that one is "special" everybody is the same. Well, oneself being special to oneself is another given, but if you want to establish that objectively, then you need an objective viewpoint, that is to say, a gallery of mediocrities. Going out on a limb, it's not geniuses that can spot a genius' worth. Or rather, geniuses don't understand genius. It is always mediocrities that understand genius—though whether that leads to praise or ostracism depends on the case.

This book is a story that includes a lot of characters that are termed geniuses. Kanami Ibuki, Yayoi Sashirono, Akane Sonoyama, Maki Himena, Tomo Kunagisa, and Jun Aikawa. But actually, aside from them, perhaps there are other characters in it who merit the designation of "genius" that simply aren't termed as such. Conversely, not just in stories but in all cases, a person can be genius-like without being a genius or put on genius-like airs without being a genius. Moreover, there must be people who are geniuses in name and in fact who don't give off a whiff of their genius or put on genius-like airs. A genius only becomes a genius by being termed a genius, but maybe, in being termed a genius, the genius isn't such a genius. And so, that was Decapitation: The Blue Savant and the Nonsense User, the opening salvo of the Nonsense series.

An inordinate amount of labor goes into presenting a book to the

world. The fact that this one has been published means that I have been aided by all sorts of people. I would like to express my gratitude to all of them, but here, let me especially thank Kodansha's mass market paperback department and Mr. take who handled the illustrations.

NISIOISIN

Decapitation 1

KODANSHA COMICS Digital Edition

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English digital edition published by Kodansha USA Publishing, LLC, New York.

www.kodanshacomics.com

ISBN: 9781646598304

Digital Edition: 1.0.0